

# America's First Lady of Courage

In the year 1890, the town of Tuscumbia, Alabama, had a law about dogs. Any dog that was found wandering around town without its owner would be put to death. A dog named Lioness roamed the streets of Tuscumbia alone one night. After Lioness was killed, people from all over the United States and Europe sent money to the famous ten-year-old girl who had owned Lioness so the girl could buy a new dog. The girl, however, had other plans for the money. She thanked people for their concern and then asked to use the money to send Tommy Stringer, a poor blind boy, to a special school. At the age of ten, Helen Keller's lifelong career of giving had already begun.

Three years earlier, Helen would not have been able to offer this help. The seven-year-old was trapped inside a dark and quiet world. A fever she had as an infant had left her blind and deaf. She used simple signs to let her family know her needs, but she did not understand language. She did not know that the people around her moved their lips. She did not know that things had names. The trouble she had communicating frustrated Helen. In anger, she threw fragile objects across the room, had wild temper tantrums, and even locked her mother in the pantry.

Helen's parents knew they had to do something about her wild behavior. They hired Annie Sullivan to tutor Helen, and Annie quickly found that she had a challenge on her hands. First, she "tamed" Helen by not giving in to her tantrums. Then, she

taught Helen about language. Annie traced patterns on the palm of Helen's hand with her finger. At first, Helen didn't understand that the patterns stood for words. When she began to understand, however, there was no stopping her. She learned so quickly that she became famous worldwide for her accomplishments. She



mastered not only English, but also French, German, Greek, and Latin. She later wrote that language freed her, and Helen would spend the rest of her life freeing others with her words.

Annie stayed with Helen for fifty years. When Helen was young, Annie took her on picnics, long walks, and toboggan rides.

She spelled in Helen's hand and translated countless books into Braille for Helen to read. By 1905, Helen had graduated from college with honors, written a book about her life, and learned to speak. After graduation, Helen became a member of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind.

Then, Helen and Annie hit the road. They were invited to Washington, D.C.; Europe; and Japan. At each stop, they shook hands with presidents, kings, princes, and prime ministers. Most importantly, they spoke to crowds of people. Helen gave other disabled people hope by speaking about the independence she now experienced. Sometimes, she spoke about the unfair treatment of women, the poor, and others who struggled for justice. Helen always asked her audiences to treat themselves and all other people with dignity and respect.



When Annie Sullivan died in 1936, Helen missed her dearly. She started writing a book about Annie. When her notes for the book were destroyed in a house fire, she began a new book, and in 1955, *Teacher* was published.

Helen lived another 32 years after Annie died. With the help of a new assistant, Polly Thomson, she continued to spread hope around the globe. When soldiers in World War II were blinded in battle, Helen visited them in the hospital. When the American Foundation for the Blind was formed, Helen and Polly raised funds for the

organization. They visited Scotland, Ireland, South Africa, and the Middle East, speaking to crowds and supporting laws that helped the disabled and disadvantaged.

Polly Thomson died in 1960. Helen was old and fragile herself by then. During the next eight years, Helen suffered a series of strokes and was seldom seen in public, and in 1968, she died. At the time of her death, she had written four books and worked for several foundations for the blind. She had given speeches and visited the disabled around the world. She had even been the subject of three movies. Her lifelong determination to succeed and her concern that all others have the chance to live a full life earned Helen Keller the title “America’s First Lady of Courage.”

## Questions About America's First Lady of Courage

1. When Helen Keller was a young girl, why did it seem unlikely that she would become a woman who helped other people?
2. Do you think that the people who gave young Helen money to buy a new dog were upset when she spent the money on something else? Explain why or why not.
3. Why do you think that Helen wanted to write a book about Annie Sullivan?
4. Why did Helen Keller become known as "America's First Lady of Courage"?
5. Although she could not see or hear, Helen Keller did things in her lifetime that many people who can see and hear will never do. List three of her remarkable accomplishments.

## Vocabulary

*Match each word to its definition.*

pantry	traced	Braille	tantrum	mastered	foundation
dignity	fragile	commission	tutor	disabled	stroke

1. a sudden stop of blood flowing to the brain
2. became very competent or skillful
3. a small room for storing food and kitchen supplies
4. unable to perform some normal physical activity
5. delicate; easily broken
6. a group formed to carry out a particular action or duty
7. drew a copy of something
8. worth and honor
9. a private teacher
10. an organization that supports a particular cause
11. a rant or fit of temper

12. a printing system of raised dot patterns that blind people can read with their fingertips

## **Root Words**

*A root word is the main word, or base word, to which a prefix or a suffix has been added. Write the root word for each word listed below.*

1. countless
2. assistant
3. earlier
4. famous
5. graduation
6. accomplishments
7. disadvantaged
8. organization

## **Symbolic Actions**

*Before Helen Keller understood language, she used simple actions to communicate. She pretended to slice and butter a piece of bread when she wanted to eat, or she imitated putting on reading glasses when she wanted her father. What actions would you use to communicate the following information?*

1. You are outside and want to go inside.
2. You want to go for a drive.
3. You want to read a book.
4. You want to listen to music.
5. You want to watch a movie.
6. You want to visit a friend.

7. You want to play basketball.
8. You want to go shopping.
9. You want to go to school.
10. You want a drink of water.

## **Write About It**

1. When Helen Keller was a young girl, she felt very frustrated because she was not able to communicate with others. Think about a time when you felt very frustrated.

Write about why you were frustrated and how you dealt with your frustration.

2. Helen Keller accomplished a lot more in her lifetime than many people expected of a blind and deaf girl. Think about a time when you surprised yourself or someone else with something you accomplished. Write about your accomplishment and why it was surprising.