

Helen Keller

When Helen was little more than one year old, she became very ill. When she recovered from the illness, her parents found that their little girl could no longer see or hear.

It was a frightening experience for a little one year old, to find herself suddenly in a world of darkness. She just clung to her mother's dress all day as her mother went about the housework. Her mother loved Helen very much and helped her understand the world around her.

By the time Helen was five she was able to help her mother fold and put away the clean clothes. She was even able to tell her own clothes from the rest.

Three months before Helen turned seven, a teacher came to live with them. Miss Sullivan would be Helen's own personal teacher. Miss Sullivan taught Helen to understand letters, which she would spell into the palm of Helen's hand. Helen could tell one letter from another by feel alone. Soon she was able to put letters together to make words. Helen learned to make words into Miss Sullivan's hand too, and before long they were able to talk to each other using the silent language.

Miss Sullivan then taught Helen to read words, which were written in raised type, on special pieces of cardboard. Helen could read the words by feeling the letters. This was called Braille. Miss Sullivan would play hide and seek with Helen using the Braille word cards. It was Helen who actually thought up the game. One day she pinned the Braille word, 'girl', on her dress and hid in the wardrobe. She had left some other words on the shelf, as clues for Miss Sullivan. The words were: 'is', 'in', 'wardrobe'. This meant that Miss Sullivan had to go and look for Helen in the wardrobe. She and her teacher played this game for hours at a time.

Because Helen was only one year old when she became deaf, she had not been able to speak with her voice as we do. When Helen was ten, Miss Sullivan heard about a deaf girl in Norway who had been taught to speak using her voice. Helen wanted to try to do this too. It was very difficult because she had to learn how to say sounds by feeling the position of the teacher's tongue and lips as the sound was being made. Then Helen would have to copy what the teacher did. On her first day, Helen had managed to imitate six sounds!

Helen never gave up. She kept trying until she was able to speak using her voice. When she was older, Helen helped others who had problems like herself. She wrote books and travelled the country giving speeches about helping the blind and deaf. She didn't need her teacher any more, but she always remembered Miss Sullivan, who had been so patient and kind to her.

Helen Keller was born in the U.S.A. and lived from 1880-1986.

Activities

1. When did Helen become ill?
2. What happened to Helen because of the illness?
3. How did Helen's mother let Helen help around the house?
4. How did Miss Sullivan help Helen?
5. How did Helen learn to speak?
6. Why would we say that Miss Sullivan was patient and kind?
7. If you knew someone who was blind or deaf, what could you do to help them?