

Name _____ Date _____

Helen Keller & Overcoming Obstacles

The Life of Helen Keller

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Helen Adams Keller was born on June 27, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama. She was a healthy baby, but before she turned two, she got a bad fever. Back then, they did not have the medicines that we have now to make fevers go away. Keller's fever was so bad that it hurt her eyes and ears. For the rest of her life, Keller was blind, which means she couldn't see. She was also deaf, which means she couldn't hear. Baby Keller's life was very difficult. If you cannot hear, it's hard to learn to talk. Because she could not talk, Helen had trouble communicating what she wanted. When she got frustrated, she threw tantrums. She kicked and screamed until she wore herself out. The Kellers called her a wild child.

Notes

2. Keller's parents wanted their daughter to get an education. There were no schools for deaf and blind children in Alabama when Keller was a child. The Kellers wrote to a special school for the blind called the Perkins Institute. They sent a young woman named Anne Sullivan to be Keller's teacher. Sullivan was also nearly blind because she had been sick as a child. This helped her understand Keller's challenges. At first Keller kicked and screamed and would not learn from Sullivan. Sullivan persevered, she never gave up. She taught Keller to communicate, read, write and speak. Sullivan traveled with Keller to school and later to college. Sullivan remained Keller's teacher and close friend for the rest of her life.

Notes

3. People who are deaf can communicate in sign language. This is a language made of hand gestures. Anne Sullivan taught Helen Keller to communicate using the sign language alphabet. Sullivan would sign the letters into the palm of Keller's hand. This is called fingerspelling. At first Keller did not understand the connection between the letters in her palm and actual words. One day Sullivan took Keller to the water pump in the yard. She pumped water over one of Keller's hands while signing the word W-A-T-E-R into the other. Keller finally understood. After learning one word, she wanted to learn everything. Keller learned 30 more words that day. Her vocabulary grew so quickly that, only one year later, she was ready to go to school.

Notes

4. People who are blind can read with their fingers instead of their eyes. They can use a system called braille. Braille letters are made up of dots that stick up off the page. People who can read braille feel the dots, and they know what the dots mean.

Notes

Braille was invented by a French boy named Louis Braille when he was only 12 years old! Like Keller, Louis Braille lost his sight at a young age. When he went to school, there were only a few books for the blind. They had raised letters instead of dots and were expensive and hard to read. When Louis was 12, he met a soldier who showed him a secret code. The code was a series of raised dots that soldiers used to communicate in the dark. Louis perfected the code, making it simpler and easier to use. Braille was slow to catch on at first, but now it is used by blind communities all over the world.

5. Sullivan taught Keller fingerspelling and braille. Keller learned many other ways of communicating. She learned how to understand what people said to her even though she could not see or hear them. Keller could read their lips. She would place her fingers gently on their mouths while they spoke so that she could feel the words. She even learned to speak by feeling Sullivan's lips and vocal chords. Vocal chords vibrate when people talk, and Keller could feel the vibrations. Sullivan taught Keller to write longhand with paper and pencil and to type on a typewriter. Keller could express herself beautifully through writing. Being able to write and speak helped Keller express herself and advocate for others.

Notes

6. Keller dedicated her adult life to activism, helping other people and causes. She fought for peace during wartime. She believed women should be allowed to vote. She was one of the first members for the American Civil Liberties Union. This organization is still around today and aims to protect all civil rights. Keller spent her life touring the US and the world to educate lawmakers. Her goal was to make leaders understand that the blind are equal members of society and deserve education and support. She persevered in spite of many obstacles, including prejudice against people with disabilities. Her determination and story helped change laws and create opportunities for people with disabilities all over the world.

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