

Famous Person: Helen Keller

Related Topics: Deaf/Blind,
Overcoming Adversity,
Women's Rights

Grade Level: 5th/6th

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Background:

Helen Keller was born on June 27th, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama. She was a bright infant, interested in everything around her, and imitating adults at a very young age. In February of 1882, she was struck with an illness which left her deaf and blind. For several years, Helen had very little communication with the rest of the world, except for a few signs which she used with her family. When she was six, her parents wanted desperately to do something to help their strong-willed, half-wild, child. They were far from any deaf or blind schools, and doubted that anyone would come to the little town to educate their deaf and blind child. They heard of a doctor in Baltimore who had helped many seemingly hopeless cases of blindness, but when he examined Helen, there was nothing he could do for her. However, he referred them to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell who recommended Anne Sullivan to teach Helen.

On March 3, 1887 Helen met "the Miracle Worker," Anne Mansfield Sullivan. Then, about a month later on April 5, Helen associated the water running over her hand with the letters w-a-t-e r that Anne was spelling into her hand. That day she learned thirty words and proved to be a very intelligent, fast learner from then on. She quickly learned the finger-tip alphabet and

shortly thereafter, to write. Helen had mastered Braille and learned how to use a typewriter by the age of 10. When she was 16, she could speak well enough to attend preparatory school and college. In 1904 she graduated from Radcliffe College with Anne Sullivan by her side interpreting lectures and class discussion to her.

Helen then dedicated her life to improving the world. She delivered many lectures to improve the conditions for the blind and deaf-blind. She spoke out for women's rights and pacifism. She spoke in over 25 countries bringing new hope to many people. She spoke against World War I and her pay from lectures declined because of her stand. During World War II she visited military personnel who had become blind and/or deaf because of injuries. She also spent a lot of time raising funds for organizations working with the deaf and blind. Helen also wrote several books concerning her life, her religious beliefs, and her teacher Anne Sullivan. Helen said this of her teacher, she "is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself apart from her...I feel that her being is inseparable from my own, and that the footsteps of my life are in hers...all the best of me belongs to her"(Keller, p.53, 1976).

Helen Keller was a strong, intelligent woman. She overcame many obstacles in her own life to go on and improve the lives of others. She died June 1, 1968 in Westport, Connecticut and will go down in history as "America's First Lady of Courage."

References:

Birmingham Net. (No Date Given) Tusculumbia, AL USA: The Helen Keller Story.[On-line]. Available: <http://www.bham.net/keller'sstory.html>

Hawk, David. (No Date Given) dhawk's web page/part of the WELL community.[On-line]. Available: <http://www.well.com/user/dhawk/keller.html>

Keller, Helen. (1976). The Story of My Life. Park Ridge, NJ: Andor Publishing, Inc.

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to describe several of the obstacles overcome by Helen Keller.
2. Students will be able to identify adversity in their own lives and think about their views of dealing with it and/or ways of overcoming it.

3. Students will demonstrate an ability to work with others to overcome adversity and attain goals.
4. Students will demonstrate an awareness and willingness to work to improve something in the world around them.
5. Students will write and give speeches on issues in the world today, giving reasons the issue needs support and ideas for solutions.

Time Allotment: Approximately 7 class periods.

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Resources Needed:

Copies of *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller
Materials for an obstacle course - ideas in Appendix
Sample outline for speeches from [Appendix](#)

Procedures:

1. **Think-Pair-Share.** Individually have students think of the adversities or obstacles they have come across in their own lives or seen in others. In pairs have students share the obstacles they have come up with. In large group have students build a class list of all of the various adversities that people in the class have had or seen in the lives of others around them.
2. **Mini-Lecture.** Using the class list, talk about adversity as being conquerable, and actually making us stronger. Share that a person named Helen Keller had major obstacles in her life. She became deaf and blind at 19 months old from an illness. She not only conquered her adversity, but she went on to help others as well. Using the background information, give a brief overview of Helen Keller's life, adversities and contributions.
3. **Literature Jigsaw.** Divide the class into groups of about 5 or 6 students each. Divide the book *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller into equal sections. There are 23 chapters, so depending on class size, each group should have about 3-4 chapters to read. If possible give each group a copy of the book. (Check in school library, public library, or students' families.) If you don't have enough, give groups with the first portion a copy first and then to those with

the second and so on. Have each group decide how it will get the chapters read so that every person knows what happened in their section of the book and will be prepared to present this to other classmates. When all groups have finished reading, have them discuss together their chapters to build their confidence and solidify their knowledge. Then create groups where there is at least one person from each section of the book present to tell about what they have read. Then have students choose a way to reflect on the adversities and experiences in Helen Keller's life: 1) write in reflection journal, 2) discuss with a friend or, 3) make an illustration.

4. **Simulation Journal.** Set up an obstacle course (ideas in Appendix) in another room or outside where students will not see it prior to the experience. Have class get into pairs. Explain that there is to be absolutely no talking from anyone, and one person in each pair is to be blindfolded. Each pair must work together to get through the obstacle course. After everyone has had a try at the course, come back to the classroom and have students write in journals about how they felt not being able to talk and/or blind, was it hard to communicate, how did having partners help, were they able to work together to reach their goal?

5. **Four-Corners.** Put up one of Helen Keller's quotes (listed in [Appendix](#)) in each corner of the room. Ask students to decide which one they agree with, or fits their personal views the most, and go to that corner. In pairs, have them discuss their reasoning and ideas. Then share as larger group. (If group is too large, break into smaller groups.) Have groups designate a spokes-person to explain the group's reasoning. Ask if anyone would like to change corners and if so, why?

6. **Speeches.** Discuss with the class how Helen Keller gave lectures on how to help the deaf and blind, women's rights and pacifism (against war and violence). With the class, brainstorm issues in the world today which could use some public awareness or support. Have students choose one and write a speech, giving reasons why the issue needs support, and ideas for solutions. These speeches will be given in front of the class, on the last day of this unit, as a culminating event. (Outline handout in Appendix)

7. **Learning Logs.** In learning journals have each student write about what they have learned about Helen Keller, conquering adversity, and themselves. Students should include at least three important ideas from one or more of these areas.

Assessment:

1. Participation in Think-Pair-Share and group list obstacle contributions will be assessed informally through observation.

2. Amount and depth of reflection from the literature will be assessed anecdotally.
3. Simulation journals will be assessed. How well did they work together to overcome their obstacles and obtain their goal.
4. Reasoning and ideas in Four-Corners will be assessed informally through observation.
5. Speeches given will be assessed on how well the issue was supported and the legitimacy of solutions.
6. Learning Logs containing three important ideas they have gained from the mini-unit will be assessed.

Appendix:

Obstacle Course Ideas: Set up large cardboard boxes for tunnels, use chairs for roadblocks to step or crawl over, have a typewriter with instructions that the "blind" person must type his/her name, have wagons where one person must ride and the other must pull it through a small course of cones or chairs, have paper bags filled with newspaper and individual sticks of gum where the blind person must find two sticks, one for him/herself and one for the helper, anything where the two must work and problem solve together to attain their goal of the finish line. You may want to set a time limit depending on the difficulty of your course.

Quotes from Helen Keller:

"Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature... Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."

"When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us."

"Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. The fearful are caught as often as the bold."

"Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it."

I. Introduction - what is my issue, catch listener's attention so they will want to hear more.

A.

II. Reasons to support my issue.

A.

B.

C.

D.

III. Possible solutions or ways to help.

A.

B.

C.

D.

IV. Conclusion - summary or review and a call to action.

A.

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