



D y n a m i c D u o

Every once in a while there is a combination of forces that alters our world forever. Such is the case with Helen Keller, and her teacher, Anne Sullivan. Learning about how these two women rose above and beyond their physical disabilities and economic circumstances has been an integral part in the curriculum of every child's education for decades. It may be surprising to learn that both lived in Forest Hills from 1917 to 1936..

Helen Keller was born a perfectly healthy baby in 1888. Her father was a Captain in the Confederate Army and her mother was a second cousin to Robert E. Lee. However, after suffering an attack of Scarlet Fever, Helen became deaf and blind when she was nineteen months old. Fortunately, since she was born into a well-to-do family, they were able to hire a private teacher for their daughter when she turned seven. That teacher was Anne Sullivan.

Born into extreme poverty, Sullivan, developed trachoma, a bacterial eye infection, when she was five years old. Because it was left untreated, she became blind. Her mother died when Sullivan was seven, forcing both Anne and her crippled brother, Jimmie, to live with their alcoholic father who eventually abandoned them. They were then sent to the state's "poorhouse" in Tewksbury, Massachusetts, where they lived with the mentally ill and other people who could not function in society on their own. Living conditions were deplorable. Despite his older sister's efforts, Jimmie died of tuberculosis several months after moving to Tewksbury. Left on her own, Anne became a prisoner to the institution's cruel and sexually-perverted practices.

It wasn't until Sullivan was accepted into the Perkins School for the Blind that her life turned around. She regained her eyesight after undergoing an operation and soon afterwards learned the rudimentary manual and finger alphabet. One year after graduating as the

school's valedictorian, Sullivan was hired to become Helen Keller's teacher, thanks to Alexander Graham Bell who worked at Perkins.

In 1917, with the help of Robert E. Marsh, a realtor for Cord Meyer, Keller and Sullivan moved into a corner house at Seminole Avenue and Gown Street on the North side of Queens Blvd.

They lived one block away from The First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills, and attended several Sunday services there. They also visited The-Church-in-the-Gardens where Keller gave a special talk to the children. Both women were spiritual in their beliefs but neither belonged to any religious institutions.

Shortly afterwards, 'Robbie,' as Keller often called Marsh, moved around the corner with his wife and their three children. The two households became long-lasting friends. They often vacationed together. During one trip to Fire Island, NY, Keller chose to sleep directly under the stars on the beach during the evenings.

While researching for this article, it was interesting to learn that Keller's childhood bout with Scarlet Fever not only damaged her ocular and audio nerves, but it also burned some of her hair follicles. As a result, Keller often wore a hairpiece. Often while the two neighbors gathered over milk and cookies, a couple of the Marsh kids would sneakily move Keller's hairpiece to different positions on her

head. She went along with the pranks in good humor.

Keller gave her first speech in Forest Hills on the steps of Station Square. The event was for the recently-formed Rainbow Division, otherwise known as the 42nd Infantry. Keller, along with other speakers, gave patriotic-themed talks to approximately 1,200 soldiers before they shipped off to the front lines in France during World War I.

Keller loved dogs and owned many over the years. She never used them as guides. When she was a young girl, she finger-spelled onto their paws. Some people recalled seeing Keller walk along Continental Avenue with a couple of her Great Danes.

Keller and Sullivan used their new home as a base for fundraising tours for a variety of causes. They lobbied for measures to aid the blind, including reading services and Social Security acceptance. They traveled to Hollywood to produce "Deliverance," a silent movie based on Keller's life, to raise some money. Unfortunately, the movie was a flop; however, their 'vaudeville' appearances were a huge success. Keller answered questions asked about her life and her politics while Anne translated the answers to a captivated audience.

Sullivan revolutionized the education of children while she taught Keller. Her theories pre-dated Maria Montessori's, who like Sullivan, didn't follow a structured curriculum. Instead, Sullivan taught her students based on the questions they asked. Too bad she didn't copyright her teaching methodology. It also explains why Sullivan referred to Keller as her teacher.

Years later, Sullivan also taught Keller to speak by having her place fingers on Sullivan's mouth and throat then mimic the vibrations she felt. They even captured this activity on film which can be found on www.youtube.com.

Sullivan's radical teaching method is well documented in the 1962 movie classic, "The Miracle Worker." Patty Duke played the part of Helen

Keller and Anne Bancroft portrayed Ann Sullivan. The show has recently been revived on Broadway.

The two women were not only advocates for people with disabilities, but other causes as well. As an active member of the Socialist Party, Keller supported such controversial groups as the Industrial Workers of the World, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Margaret Sanger's Birth Control Crusade and was a founding member of the Communist American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

Keller turned the world's viewpoint around on the treatment of disabled people. Winston Churchill called Keller "the greatest woman of our age." Her friend Mark Twain said that she was "fellow to Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon, Homer, Shakespeare, and the rest of the immortals." Over the period of her lifetime she worked with seven presidents and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

When the 71st Street subway station opened in 1936, Keller was so excited she took the train just for the sake of taking a train into Manhattan with her secretary, Polly Thompson. It was around this time that Sullivan died after months of gradually losing her eyesight and suffering from heart disease. Keller and Thompson attended to Sullivan throughout her illness. Soon afterward, Keller sold the house and moved to Massachusetts. Some believed the Forest Hills home reminded Keller too much of her long-time friend and soul sister.

Now through July 30th, we can witness their journey at the American Foundation for the Blind at 2 Penn Plaza. "A Daring Adventure" displays a vast collection of Keller's writings, photographs and personal items, many of which have never been viewed before. For more information call (212) 502-7600.

In 1961, the Keller house was demolished and replaced by Temple Sinai. A plaque appears by the front entrance acknowledging that Helen Keller and her companions once lived on this site. I'm sure they all would have been honored.