

## A Word from Keller Johnson-Thompson

Winston Churchill called her “the greatest woman of the twentieth century.” Mark Twain went even further, calling her “the most extraordinary product of all the ages.”

Helen Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, on June 27, 1880. At the age of 19 months she was stricken with a sudden illness that would leave her both blind and deaf for the rest of her life.

It was Alexander Graham Bell who put the Keller family in touch with the Perkins Institution for the Blind, which arranged for Annie Sullivan to become Helen’s teacher. With determination and compassion, Annie took charge of her student and led her into life, starting with that famous day at the water pump when she spelled W-A-T-E-R into Helen’s hand.

I always knew I had a special connection to Helen Keller. I was born in Helen Keller Memorial Hospital and named after my great-great-aunt. I remember blindfolding myself with one of my mother’s scarves and putting cotton balls in my ears to help me imagine what kind of world she must have lived in. After reading Helen Keller’s autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, when I was 9 years old, I realized that Helen Keller did much more than learn what W-A-T-E-R stood for. I was amazed to learn that a deaf-blind person could learn to read, write, and speak in several languages. She would meet ten U.S. presidents, travel to 39 countries, receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the rich and famous would call her their friend. She was an author, activist and diplomat who fought for people on the margins of society. It was the moment I realized that Helen Keller’s life was about helping others that I knew I would someday follow in her footsteps.

Today, as Ambassador for the American Foundation for the Blind, I am fulfilling that dream. In this capacity—the same position held by my great-great-aunt—I share the message that Helen Keller’s life was not just about being deaf and blind. It was about overcoming incredible odds, sacrificing for what you really want in life, and leaving the world better than you found it.

So powerful a symbol of triumph did she become that she has an indisputable place in the history of our time and of times to come. Upon her death in 1968, Senator Lister Hill of Alabama expressed the feelings of the world at the funeral services at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., when he said, “She will live on as one of the few, the immortal names not born to die. Her spirit will endure as long as man can read, and stories can be told of the woman who showed the world that there are no boundaries to courage and faith.”

Keller Johnson-Thompson

Keller Johnson-Thompson is Ambassador for the American Foundation for the Blind in New York City.