

Annie Sullivan Background Info

Annie Sullivan was born in April of 1866. The child of poor Irish immigrants, Sullivan herself went blind as a child due to untreated eye disease and was sent to the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston. Though her vision was partially restored after surgery, she remained visually impaired throughout her life.

Even at an early age, Sullivan had a strong-willed personality. She sometimes clashed with her father, Thomas, who was left to raise Sullivan and her siblings after their mother's death when Sullivan was 8. Thomas—who was often abusive—eventually abandoned the family. Anne and her infirm younger brother, Jimmie, were sent to live at the Tewksbury Almshouse, a home for the poor. Tewksbury Almshouse was dirty, rundown, and overcrowded. Sullivan's brother Jimmie died just months after they arrived there, leaving Anne alone. While at Tewksbury, Sullivan learned about schools for the blind and became determined to get an education as a means to escape poverty. She got her chance when members from a special commission visited the home. After following the group around all day, she worked up the nerve to talk to them about sending her to a special school.

After Sullivan graduated as class valedictorian, the school director recommended the 20-year-old for a position teaching 6-year-old Helen Keller in the small town of Tuscumbia, Alabama. Keller, who had been left blind and deaf due to disease as a toddler, had very limited means of communication but her young teacher soon helped her break out of, as Keller later described, the "silence and darkness that surrounded me."