



Disability History and Awareness Month 2023

Hellen Keller

When thinking of influential disability rights activists to include in this floor letter, few names come to mind faster than Hellen Keller. She was born in 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama, and became deafblind (loss of hearing and sight) at 18 months old due to an unknown severe illness – believed to be meningitis. Despite the stigma surrounding disability, she received an education from a combination of specialized and mainstream schools – later attending the Radcliffe college of Harvard University and ultimately becoming the first deafblind person to obtain a bachelor's degree.



Following her degree completion, Keller made disability advocacy her life work. She spent most of her life working for the American Foundation for the Blind. She traveled the world delivering speeches and contributing to various advocacy efforts, including the feminist movement and the civil rights movement. Keller was a founding member of the ACLU and believed that the social relations surrounding disability, not disability itself, were to blame for the negative perception of people with disabilities. Later in life, Keller was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. She was elected to the Women's National Hall of Fame the following year. Keller also became an accomplished writer, having written at least 12 books in her lifetime before ultimately passing in her sleep at her home in 1968.

Despite leading a well-documented and remarkable life of disability, racial, and feminist activism, Keller has recently become the subject of baseless conspiracies suggesting that she was never disabled on the basis that no one with a severe disability could have accomplished what she was able to in her lifetime. Unfounded conspiracies like these ultimately undermine the broader disabled community and contribute to ableist attitudes in society.

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