

HELEN KELLER: CITIZEN OF FOREST HILLS

by Jeff Gottlieb

Her first official appearance in Forest Hills took place on September 29, 1917, in Station Square. 1,200 men of the Rainbow Division, stationed at Camp Mills, were selected by the YMCA and brought to Forest Hills to be given dinners in local homes. A round of speakers, on patriotic themes, ended the evening in the Square. Among the speakers was the famous Helen Keller, inspiration to the handicapped, a thirty-seven year old deaf and blind person who had graduated from prestigious Radcliffe College in 1904.

Born in Tuscombia, Alabama, in 1880, Keller could have been successful as a seeing and hearing person. Her parents were well-off, and she was bright. At eighteen months of age, though, a serious illness caused a complete loss of sight and hearing. Her future was dim.

Born into different circumstances was Anne Mansfield Sullivan. When orphaned at an early age, this daughter of impoverished Irish immigrant parents was aided by poor relatives and then sent to a State Infirmity, in Massachusetts. Her eyesight, despite operations, remained poor, and she finally was accepted to the Perkins Institution for the Blind. Further operations would improve her sight, but the Perkins Institute's greatest contributions to Anne Mansfield Sullivan was to allow her contact with Laura Bridgman, blind and deaf, trained at Perkins, and to learn the manual, or finger, alphabet.

Miss Mansfield graduated, in 1886, as valedictorian of her class. In 1887, in response to Arthur Keller's letter, she was selected as teacher to the young Helen Keller, Page 1

Keller. They became lifelong friends. Even marriage to Albert Macy, in 1905, didn't stop Teacher from educating Helen, preparing her emotionally, socially, and educationally for the seeing, speaking, hearing world.

The headwaiter of the Prince George Hotel had told them about a roomy house for sale in Forest Hills. The suburban, almost rural, community appealed to them, and the sales agreement was conducted by realtor Thomas Hart, who lived in Forest Hills Gardens and had offices on Continental Avenue, directly across from what was to be the Peter Pan Bakery. Miss Keller typed the contract on a Braille typewriter.

She moved in, with secretary Polly Thompson and Anne Sullivan Macy, in October 1917, taking three days to unload furniture and put books, clothes, linen, and dishes in place.

Helen Keller familiarized herself with the neighborhood. Her house, at 71-11 112th Street (now the site of Temple Sinai in Forest Hills) was at the corner of Gown Street (present 71st Avenue) and Seminole Street (now 112th Street, across from the First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills, built in 1912, the first Christian congregation and church in Forest Hills.

Miss Keller walked on Continental Avenue with two Great Danes in the 1920's. She was friendly to neighborhood children. A medium-height, heavy-set woman in her forties, Helen gave a recital at the Forest Hills Theatre, on Continental Avenue, on "Nearer My G-d to Thee."

Ethel Reiss remembers Keller; Charles H. Reiss, Ethel's father, was the town plumber, had jobs at the Keller house, and conversed with the lady.

It was a different Forest Hills than now. MacDonald Park didn't exist, and Parker
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Towers and Gerard Towers were vacant lots. The Normandy (106-15 Queens Boulevard) was the site of an old shack and woods beyond it. The two Backus houses dominated the Boulevard; Frederick Backus lived at 69th Avenue and Queens Boulevard, the LaCueva/Bagel Stop shopping center now, and brother John at the present Hush-a-Bye location, at Shelbourne Street (70th Road today) and Queens Boulevard). Trolleys were on both sides of Queens Boulevard.

Garages dominated Austin Street. There are still curb cuts on Austin, between 70th Avenue and 70th Road, indicating entrances to Galbraiths and Hargrave's garages. Austin Street west ended where Yellowstone Boulevard (then Avenue) is located today, and Austin Street east of Ascan Avenue was a dirt road.

Continental Avenue had Hagen's warehouse and dry goods store (Waldenbooks today), Weesmantle's Bakery and Beyle Butcher (Williamsburgh Savings Bank), and vacant lots (Peter Pan to Austin Street).

There was a road cut from Austin Street up to the embankment where the Forest Hills Railroad Station was located. The embankment was used for sleigh riding; children shot down the hill to Austin Street and Windsor Place (now 71st Road. Markwordts was the site of the old Forest Hills Volunteer Fire Company, which lasted from 1908 to 1924.

Houses dotted the landscape on Continental and Austin. The Peter Pan building was Reiss' home property, and a family lived in a private building, with a cleaning and dyeing place on the first floor, where Continental Bazaar is now located. The Schweiberts' house was at Windsor (71st Road) and Austin Street; they owned a grocery store where King George Restaurant is now located, at 71st Avenue and Austin Street. The Kandajian family house was at 71st Road and Queens Boulevard, while several

families, mostly Cord Meyer employees, lived in the 1906 row houses on Roman (72nd Avenue) Avenue, between Austin Street and Queens Boulevard. Henry Muller, owner of Muller's Warehouse, at 67th Avenue, lived on Portsmouth Street (109-23 72nd Road), opposite the wood chapel of Queen of Martyrs Church.

New neighbors filled the area called the Cord Meyer section of Forest Hills. One family, living two blocks away, were the O'Connors; the father was a lawyer, the mother a school teacher who helped turn out her father's Irish newspaper. Elise O'Connor's sons Hugh and Robert became doctors; her eldest, Carroll, turned to acting after leaving the Merchant Marine in 1945. We know him.

Helen Keller and family enjoyed the suburban living, even when "civilization" encroached upon their lives. The opening of the Continental Avenue subway station, on December 31, 1936, to the general public, excited Miss Keller, who, with Polly Thompson, took a ride into mid-town Manhattan.

But sadness was also part of her life. Anne Sullivan Macy, the beloved Teacher, was slowly going blind, despite surgery to both eyes. A May 1935 operation left her with enough sight to see only light and color. A heart ailment was weakening her. She lapsed into a coma and died on October 20, 1936, causing great mourning in the household.

The house reminded Helen Keller of Anne Sullivan Macy. Travel came easy to the family--Helen, in her Forest Hills years, had already visited England, France, Yugoslavia, and Japan. She moved to Westport, Connecticut in 1938 and had her Forest Hills residence sold for \$9,000.00, in cash, in mid-1938. The house next to hers, on a 100' x 100' property, smaller than Keller's was sold for \$15,200.00 in 1948.

The Keller home was demolished, in 1961, to make way for Temple Sinai, whose congregation had stayed at the First Presbyterian Church for six years.

The person left, but the spirit remains. Keller was the first deaf-blind person to graduate from college and was a lobbyist for the talking book program and a national system of libraries for the blind. She met presidents and emperors and was a light for the handicapped and disabled, to overcome and to win. The best comment might be this, in response to ceremonies honoring Helen Keller at Temple Sinai: "She has been such a magnificent part of my life. ... we are all uplifted by the ... success of the human spirit exemplified by these women [Sullivan and Keller]."

The letter was written by Patty Duke, who played Helen Keller in the 1961 film, The Miracle Worker, and Anne Sullivan Macy in the _____ remake.

