

A National Icon's Powerful Speech Gave a New Service Club Its Destiny

By Jay Copp

Already an American legend for 35 years, Helen Keller slowly strode to the center of the stage. As was her custom, Helen, 45, clung to the arm of Anne Sullivan-Macy, her almost equally famous childhood teacher. The 3,000 Lions and local Ohioans in the packed convention hall in Cedar Point were loud and restless as they awaited Helen's speech. It was hard to blame them for their inattention. The poor acoustics in the cavernous hall had made it difficult to hear. Indeed, speaking in the same room a day later, a flustered district governor from North Carolina stormed off the stage and dragged a table to the middle of the room to be better heard.

But with Helen's first words the din quieted immediately. The Lions listened "hushed and awed" to Helen, according to the front-page story the next day in the Sandusky Register.

The Lions had come to the Ohio resort town on June 30, 1925, for their ninth annual convention. During the day Lions heard reports about service projects. In the late afternoons and evenings they boarded a steamer for a ride on the lake, gathered for spirited singing contests and happily handed 130 pieces of silver to the winner of a beauty contest for the mothers, wives and sisters of Lions.



Lions Clubs International was only eight years old in 1925 but growing rapidly. Each year saw large increases in membership. Clubs flourished in all 48 states and in Canada. There was a palpable sense among Lions in Ohio that the movement would gain further momentum and become a formidable social force. The question that hung in the air was what direction the association would take.

Quite a few Lions clubs helped the blind. But even more concerned themselves with children, particularly disadvantaged children. An editorial in THE LION magazine the month before the convention urged Lions to meet in Ohio to help form association policies with the "relief of handicapped children as the major activity." In Cedar Point, a Lion leader from Iowa pleaded with his fellow delegates to unite behind the cause. "We shall not have done our full duty until we either provide or see to it that society or some organization has provided our handicapped children with the best care," thundered Judge Hubert Utterback of Des Moines.

But there was no consensus among Lions as to how to muster their energies and resources. They had a clear-cut mission—to serve society³/₄but not a specific purpose. That would suddenly change.

Service, Not Self-Interest

Seated near the convention hall stage and listening carefully to Helen's words was Melvin Jones, 46, the founder of the Lions and still very much the fulcrum upon which Lions clubs turned. Jones had founded the service club in 1917 when he was a successful insurance salesman and disenchanted leading member of the Business Circle of Chicago. Jones' displeasure stemmed from the narrow self-interest of the businessman's group. Over lunch they swapped stories, traded jokes and, inevitably, gave each other leads and contacts to further their business. The group's unofficial motto was "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

Genial, persuasive and shrewd, Jones prodded the Business Circle members, who regarded themselves as community leaders, to actually do something for the community. "Any association that presumes to leadership in the community will have to offer something more than business reciprocity among the members," he told them. Over time he won them over and recruited other

similar civic groups in several cities to form the nucleus of the Lions.

Service clubs were not a novelty. Nearly every town of decent size had at least one. Typically, the leading businessmen gathered for lunch for fellowship and networking. Service was often an afterthought. Usually it was not even hands-on. Instead, the club leaders lent their considerable opinions to the mayor or city council. Club members perhaps anted up funds at the holidays to help the less fortunate, but a wholehearted commitment to service was far from the norm.

The preponderance of service clubs and their neglect of service had prompted a backlash. Popular novelist Sinclair Lewis mercilessly satirized the small town businessman in *Babbitt* in 1922 and the word “Babbitt” entered the language as a self-unaware, self-promoting, hypocritical businessman. Across the ocean, playwright George Bernard Shaw ridiculed the American “joiners.” Jones worked hard to establish service as the cornerstone of Lions. The first convention in Dallas in 1917 approved a constitution that stipulated “no member would be permitted to make a racket of his club by using it as a means of financial gain.” An ethical code for members adopted a few months later included this obligation: “To hold true friendship as an end and not a means. To hold that true friendship exists not on account of the service performed by one to another, but that true friendship demands nothing but accepts service in the spirit in which it is given.” A year or so later the annual convention approved the Lions’ Objects, which again emphasized service and barred financial self-interest. Jones and his Lions were intent on service. How that played out remained to be seen.

Blind Left Behind

America in the 1920s had become an industrial juggernaut. Model T’s rolled off the line in Detroit. Telephones, refrigerators and vacuum cleaners became commonplace. It was the era of movies, sports legends and heroic feats such as the first transatlantic flight. Optimism and visions of prosperity filled the air.

Life was on the upswing for the average American in the 1920s, but, sadly, despite the renown of Helen Keller, those with disabilities continued to face huge obstacles. Being blind was indeed a handicap. Schools, workplaces and even the average home were inhospitable to the blind. Society made little effort to accommodate those without vision.

Education and self-enrichment was particularly problematic. After a half-century of wrangling, a universal Braille code had finally found acceptance in 1917. But at the time there were no more than 300 books in this format. That was not about to change overnight: Braille books cost as much as 20 times more than a regular book.

Perhaps nowhere was the disadvantage of blindness more pronounced than in the home. Daily routines such as grooming, cooking and laundering were laborious, often dangerous chores. Optical aids for routine activities were mostly homemade. The blind were forced to rely on these crude makeshift devices or on the constant attentiveness of family and friends.

Helen Keller had helped weaken some myths about the inherent capabilities of blind people, but most people still believed those with disabilities could contribute little to society. Blind children were shunted into residential schools, which were often military-like and soul-deadening. Blind adults, if they worked at all, were confined to the traditional “blind trades” of broom-making, basket weaving and small handicrafts.

The sad assumption was that people with disabilities were doomed to suffer and deserved pity. Extend a helping hand? The person would lose his or her grip and plunge further into misery. In Middletown, a 1924 study of Muncie, Indiana, regarded as illustrative of American life, residents see no hope for the disabled among them. They were miserable and would remain so: “There are bound to be some sick, unemployed or otherwise miserable people in the world, and no change in the present social or industrial system could presumably prevent this unfortunate condition.”

The Secular Saint

By 1925, Helen Keller was a near mythic figure. She just as easily could never have been heard from. Born in 1880 in a small rural Alabama town, Helen came down with a mysterious illness not long before her second birthday. Her mother noticed that she no longer responded to the dinner bell or when she waved a hand in front of her face. Young Helen was blind and deaf, trapped in a world of no light and sound.

As an adult, Helen attained a kind of secular sainthood for her buoyant spirit and intellectual gifts. But as a young child, unable to communicate, she was a holy terror, often kicking and screaming. Her rebirth began when her desperate parents contacted Alexander Graham Bell, who, after inventing the telephone, had turned to teaching deaf children. He suggested they contact Perkins Institution and Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind, which promptly recommended Anne Sullivan as a personal teacher.

Anne set to work with Helen. After weeks of slow progress and terrible tantrums, the well-known “miracle” of recognition occurred. Anne led Helen to a water pump and held her hand there. She spelled out the word “water” on Helen’s hand. At last, she understood the mystery of language. Within a few hours she learned the spelling of 30 new words and her ability to read and write rapidly blossomed. After the director of the Perkins publicized her accomplishments (and actually exaggerated them), she became world famous.

It’s hard to appreciate today the public esteem in which Helen was held. She didn’t cross the ocean like Lindbergh or swat mammoth home runs like Ruth. She was famous not because of what she did but who she was. She was revered not just for her ample intelligence but also for her preternatural dignity and serenity. She had not merely triumphed over her disabilities but seemed to stretch the boundaries of human possibility. People who met her walked away convinced they had touched greatness. Mark Twain, a friend and fervent admirer, praised her as “fellow to Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon, Homer, Shakespeare and the rest of the immortals. ... She will be as famous a thousand years from now as she is today.”

The fact that Helen Keller, whose moral force derived from her transcendence over blindness, would meet with the Lions precisely when they were poised to commit to a service mission was a minor miracle in itself. But the appearance that Lion leaders had been begging from her for a year nearly didn’t happen.

On the Campaign Trail

In 1924, the American Foundation for the Blind hired Helen and Teacher, as she called Sullivan, to raise funds. The foundation was begun in 1921 to serve as a national clearinghouse for information about vision loss. Concern for the blind, if not actual services and opportunities, was growing. The blinded veterans from World War I were a strong impetus for change. They had arrived home from Europe and found themselves unable to work or continue their education.

The leader of the foundation, as well as its primary financial supporter, was M.C. Migel, a wealthy retired silk manufacturer. After the war, he had worked with the American Red Cross to lead the repatriation of blinded U.S. soldiers. A bon vivant who liked fine clothes, Migel was strong-minded to the point of obstinacy, a trait that would put him at odds with his chief fund-raisers.

The goal for the Helen Keller Endowment—American Foundation for the Blind was \$2 million dollars, a huge sum then. The foundation planned to use the money to prevent blindness among children and for other related purposes. Helen and Anne took to the road for three years, eventually speaking to 250,000 people at 249 meetings in 123 cities from coast to coast.

Helen had mixed motives about the tour. She was, of course, absorbed in the crusade to help the blind. She also needed the foundation’s salary. She and Anne had amassed substantial earnings in traveling the country in years past and telling their story. But neither of them was financially savvy or fiscally conservative, and they had spent their earnings on home renovations, vacations

and generous gifts for friends and those in need.

Helen was adept at raising funds, but both she and Teacher disliked it. "Beggars" and "housebreakers" was how she described it. The tour itself did not always go well. In Cincinnati, Helen was subjected to charges that she was exploiting her infirmity. In Chicago, perhaps worried about the effect on their own campaigns, charitable groups let it be known that Helen was not welcome. Migel himself had questioned whether \$2 million was realistic, and although most stops produced a steady stream of donations the ultimate goal seemed far distant. "We set out to raise that large sum in six months, and now it seems a thousand years ahead," Helen complained to a family member.

Helen's irritation with the campaign was also partly connected to her clashes with Migel. The foundation leader preferred the two spend the bulk of their time on calling on the wealthy in their homes. Helen was extraordinarily effective in soliciting funds through these home visits. But she was a socialist who privately seethed at the extravagances of the rich and humiliation washed over her when she made her pitch for support. Helen argued to Migel that the middle class could be counted to back their cause. She typically asked her audiences to pledge 25 cents a month for a year and most nights the crowds responded with generous pledges.

Weighing on Helen, too, was the precarious health of Teacher, who had lost most of her vision at age 5. The time on the road aggravated her health, and when the two reached California in late spring of 1925 Helen decided they should spend the summer there under its mild climate. Coincidentally, Migel had decided to halt the tour until the fall. The foundation asked Helen and Teacher to return to the New York office "by June 15 at the very latest."

That was like a match thrown into oil. Teacher and Helen, whose exterior placidity masked a fiery core, reminded Migel that the Lions had invited them back east for their convention and they would honor their commitment.

Later on, in the midst of another dust-up with Migel, Teacher recounted in a letter just how and why they decided to be in Cedar Point. One of the foundation leaders, a Lion, had been taking credit for enlisting the support of Helen. Teacher saw it differently. "He certainly did not get the Lions as a body to support our work. Helen did that," she wrote. "We were in San Francisco in 1925 when letters began to come from secretaries and representatives from Lions Clubs begging us to attend the National Convention at Cedar Point, Ohio, that summer. At first we refused, as we were planning to spend the summer in California for my health; but the requests became so urgent that we decided to attend the convention, whatever the personal inconvenience might be."

It was in Cedar Point that Helen Keller herself became the match that lit Lions' mission for the blind.

The Speech

Lion leaders did not promote Helen's speech prior to Cedar Point. A detailed preview article in THE LION one month before the convention did not even mention her. But the hall was full by the time Helen mounted the stage. Ohio Lions had anticipated a total turnout of 4,000 for the convention. Instead, 7,500 Lions came. Teacher spoke first, telling the powerful story of how Helen learned to talk. The Lions showered her with applause. Then a five-member blind band from Joplin, Missouri, played several tunes

Helen and Teacher returned to center stage. Helen had overcome tremendous adversity in her life but despite strenuous voice lessons had never learned to speak clearly. Her voice was tinny, robotic, almost otherworldly. So, as was her custom, Sullivan-Macy stood by Helen's side, ready to repeat each sentence for the audience. Helen braced herself. She knew that this audience was quite unlike any other. Her regular plea was for financial support. But here was a unique opportunity to marshal the resources of the civic minded.

As usual, Helen's voice was not pretty but her words poured forth with power and precision. She spoke directly to the concerns and interests of the Lions. If the first rule of speechmaking is to understand your audience, Helen fulfilled that directive splendidly. In less than 10 minutes, in a scant 500 words, she changed the course of Lions history and ultimately the personal histories of untold millions without vision or threatened by blindness:

"I suppose you have heard the legend that represents opportunity as a capricious lady, who knocks at every door but once, and if the door isn't opened quickly, she passes on, never to return. And that is as it should be. Lovely, desirable ladies won't wait. You have to go out and grab 'em.

"I am your opportunity. I am knocking at your door. I want to be adopted. The legend doesn't say what you are to do when several beautiful opportunities present themselves at the same door. I guess you have to choose the one you love best. I hope you will adopt me. I am the youngest here, and what I offer you is full of splendid opportunities for service.

"The American Foundation for the Blind is only four years old. It grew out of the imperative needs of the blind, and was called into existence by the sightless themselves. It is national and international in scope and in importance. It represents the best and most enlightened thought on our subject that has been reached so far. Its object is to make the lives of the blind more worthwhile everywhere by increasing their economic value and giving them the joy of normal activity.

"Try to imagine how you would feel if you were suddenly stricken blind today. Picture yourself stumbling and groping at noonday as in the night; your work, your independence, gone. In that dark world wouldn't you be glad if a friend took you by the hand and said, "Come with me and I will teach you how to do some of the things you used to do when you could see"? That is just the kind of friend the American Foundation is going to be to all the blind in this country if seeing people will give it the support it must have.

"You have heard how through a little word dropped from the fingers of another, a ray of light from another soul touched the darkness of my mind and I found myself, found the world, found God. It is because my teacher learned about me and broke through the dark, silent imprisonment which held me that I am able to work for myself and for others. It is the caring we want more than money. The gift without the sympathy and interest of the giver is empty. If you care, if we can make the people of this great country care, the blind will indeed triumph over blindness.

"The opportunity I bring to you, Lions, is this: To foster and sponsor the work of the American Foundation for the Blind. Will you not help me hasten the day when there shall be no preventable blindness; no little deaf, blind child untaught; no blind man or woman unaided? I appeal to you Lions, you who have your sight, your hearing, you who are strong and brave and kind. Will you not constitute yourselves Knights of the Blind in this crusade against darkness? I thank you."

Sitting in rapt attention, the Lions had heard every word. Applauding wildly, they stood en masse as Helen finished. On most stops Helen touched people's pocketbooks and purses; here she touched the soul of an organization. Caught up in the excitement, a Lion named Ben Ruffin from West Virginia proposed that Helen be given an honorary Lions membership. The motion was seconded exactly 100 times. Teacher was accorded the same honor. "I am happy and proud to be a Lion," Helen told the crowd, still buzzing. The die was cast. Before the delegates left Cedar Point they voted to adopt sight conservation and work for the blind as a major service activity.

Champions of the Blind

Helen's speech galvanized Lions. Individual clubs had been working on behalf of the blind through health camps, milk funds and scouting. Helen's plea intensified the efforts. Prior to Cedar Point, 58 clubs assisted the blind in one way or another. A year later, that number had soared to 143. Given an overarching mission, clubs fulfilled their charge in numerous ways. The Hollywood, California, Lions purchased a press for a Braille publishing house. The St. Augustine, Florida,

Lions set up a blind Girl Scout troop. The Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, Lions paid for a sight-restoring surgery for a child.

By 1927 Lions could boast about their progress and aspirations. An article in the September issue of THE LION on their blindness work bore the headline "The Greatest Program Yet Attempted by Any Service Club." "The greatest assistance which can be rendered to a blind person is to help him find his way to a fitting employment, thus making him self-respecting and self-supporting," the article proclaimed.

In the years to come Lions pioneered blindness-related ventures such as the white cane. They raised funds for the Braille and sound-recording of books, sponsored Leader Dog schools and held summer camps. They supported eye clinics, paid for the schooling of blind students and underwrote vocational training. They solidified their role as the world's greatest champions of sight in the 1990s with SightFirst, a worldwide program to prevent blindness. By 2006, SightFirst had directly prevented blindness or restored sight through cataract surgeries for 27 million people.

Helen maintained a close relationship with Lions the rest of her life. She spoke at gatherings and lent her support to official activities. Helen was the perfect vehicle to send Lions toward their destiny. She was not a do-gooder per se. Her power lay in her message and her message was herself. She embodied the inherent dignity and capabilities of those with disabilities. She didn't ask Lions to be "do-gooders." She wanted them to recognize and unleash the full humanity of those with disabilities.

Helen participated in the Lions' International Week for the Blind in Washington, D.C., in 1927. In a speech to Lions she gave her stamp of approval to their enlightened attitude toward the blind. According to Helen, Lions rejected the current view of society that blind people were miserable creatures incapable of advancement and self-enrichment. "The Lions' attitude toward the blind is something new in the world. What I mean is that Lions are trying to help the blind as they would help one of their own number who had met with a misfortune and not as people different from everyone else. ... Because the Lions are young and intelligent, they have grasped the situation, I think. That is why the Lions are going to be a power for good in the work for the sightless. ... Keep the blind before your mind's eye as people just like yourself and you will avoid the mistakes that are so often made by those who started out to assist the blind."

Then, in an eerily prescient remark, akin to her friend Mark Twain's prediction that he would exit life with Haley's Comet just as he entered it, Helen concluded: "Some day you will come together again in this beautiful capital of our country and look over the fields of your endeavors. If I am alive then, I shall stand before you with glad confidence and say to you, 'Well done, good and faithful Knights of the Blind,' and you will say with equal joy, 'We have received as richly as we have given.'"

Helen made her last public appearance in 1961 at a Lions club meeting in Washington. She received a Lions' humanitarian award and effusively thanked the Lions for their decades of stellar service to the blind. She then slowly ambled off the stage, as Lions stood and showered her with thunderous applause one final time.