

# A second look at Sullivan, Keller story

## Wrentham woman sheds some light on 'Cousin Annie'

By Heather A. Swails  
Staff Writer

WRENTHAM — Hands wet with sand, the 5-year-old girl watched as two women walking along the beach approached her. She sensed that there was something different about one of the women, and she was frightened of that difference.

The lady was old. She spoke to the girl in strange, muted tones and when the girl responded, the lady's companion tapped her fingers frantically into the old one's palm. Then the old one reached out with time-worn hands to touch her, and the girl's fear suddenly gave way to an overwhelming sense of warmth and comfort.

Little did Wrentham resident Cathleen Mansfield Burke know then that 29 years later she would begin three years of research into the intertwined lives of Helen Keller, the old woman she met that day on Connecticut's Fairfield Beach, and Annie Mansfield Sullivan, a distantly-related maternal cousin of Burke's and the



Cathleen Burke

woman who Keller affectionately called "teacher."

What began as a reluctantly executed, graduate-level genealogy project at Southern Connecticut State University, where Burke earned a master of science degree in counseling psychology, has ended in a three-act play devoted to the life of "cousin Annie," a Massachusetts

native who co-owned and occupied a home on Wrentham's East Street with Helen. Burke has also established a foundation dedicated to this little-known "miracle worker" whose educational talents brought light into a little girl's soundless and sightless life.

### Focusing on Annie

Just last week, Burke put the finishing touches on the play that was three years in the making. Once the copyright papers come back and Burke has become an official member of the Dramatists Guild, it will be rushed to the director's waiting hands at the Richfield Workshop for the Performing Arts in Connecticut, where it will open in April. But her ultimate dream is to see the play that she has called "Teacher" go to Broadway, with Anne Bancroft, who portrayed Annie in William Gibson's "The Miracle Worker," topping the bill.

"They say everybody has a book in them. I had a play in me," said Burke, commenting that Gibson's play has always bothered her. The problems with the Gibson play, she said, are that Annie's history and character are obscure and that the play does not show how Annie taught Helen. Annie, whose own sight was never normal after suffering from trachoma in early childhood, has

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## Burke

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been an obscure figure in Helen's shadow and, Burke believes, deserves much more credit than she has been given by history.

Burke's play details the 70 years of Annie's life and inevitably tells of the 50-year relationship between Annie and Helen. "You can't have one without the other," Burke said.

### 'Cousin Annie'

Living and breathing by this philosophy, Burke is disappointed that Annie is often excluded when it comes to talking about Helen. A Wrentham memorial stone, for example, celebrates pupil but not teacher, she pointed out.

The oversight, Burke says, is just one piece of the puzzle of Annie's obscurity and one of the reasons she herself felt compelled to tell the story of Annie first, and then of Annie and Helen together. "I always told my mother I had something big to do in my life. I think this is it," said Burke.

Burke's undying devotion to "cousin Annie" and her pupil does not end with the completion of "Teacher." The relationship has become a lifelong one for her as president and founder of the Annie Mansfield Sullivan Foundation.

Less than a year after she moved from Connecticut to Wrentham, Burke received approval of her non-profit founda-



This photo of Annie Sullivan, left, and Helen Keller was taken in 1899.

tion from the state. Since then, the foundation and the play have earned the support not only of the American Foundation for the Blind, but also of the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston and the museum at Ivy Green, Helen Keller's birthplace. Burke has also earned the support of many in town, including Cable 8, which will be doing a 20-minute segment on Burke and her projects for the "Around and About Wrentham" program. It will be aired on Sundays and Tuesdays from Dec. 13 to Dec. 22.

The purpose of the foundation is "to honor and preserve the memory and work of Annie Mansfield Sullivan, a native of

Massachusetts and pioneer in education," Burke said. She said she and her board of directors would like to purchase the three adjacent East Street properties owned by Annie and Helen between 1904 and 1917.

Some of the ideas for the properties have been a museum and gift shop at 349 East St., a restaurant/bookstore called Keller's Landing at 361, and either a library resource center, a school for blind and deaf children or a bed and breakfast at 343 East St.

But to start, the foundation is focusing on acquiring 349 East St. and restoring the interior as a Sullivan-Keller museum.

# Miss Burke works to erase myths in accounts about teacher, pupil

By MICHAEL D. HOLTZMAN  
Staff Writer

WRENTHAM — Helen Keller never stood with her teacher at a water well in Alabama uttering "wah, wah" when she made her breakthrough connection between objects and language.

For the vast majority of people whose exposure to the lives of Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan is the Academy Award-winning film or Broadway play, *The Miracle Worker*, the misconception persists.

Cathleen Mansfield Burke of Wrentham, at work on her first play *Teacher*, is miffed over the various forms of dramatic license taken by noted playwright William Gibson.

She points to the letter Miss Sullivan wrote in 1887 just one month after beginning the legendary teaching relationship with Helen Keller.

"As the cold water gushed forth, filling the mug, I spelled the word 'w-a-t-e-r' in Helen's free hand. The word coming so close upon the sensation of cold water rushing over her seemed to startle her.

"She dropped the mug and stood as one transfixed. A new light came into her face. She spelled 'water' several times."

Until that time, young Helen had been unable to distinguish between what, for instance, the words "milk" and "mug" meant when they were spelled by Teacher into her hand.

It would be a few years before she learned to speak the language, though her voice remained awkward.

Another objectionable — and probably inaccurate — scene in *The Miracle Worker*, said Miss Burke, is Miss Sullivan's willingness to tell Helen's parents about her horrible life in the Tewksbury Almshouse. In the play, she tells that story to emphasize to the Kellers what Helen's life in an asylum might be like.

It is documented, Miss Burke said, that Teacher did not tell her pupil about her life of poverty and deprivation until Miss Sullivan was 64 years old. Helen was about 50.

"Why would she tell the Kellers

that story after she had been with them a few months?" questions Miss Burke.

She added, "My main point is you do not need to invent drama where Annie Sullivan is concerned. Or to invent it where Helen Keller is concerned.

"He had no cause to do that," she said of Gibson.

"I'm an historian first. I started out majoring in history," said the 35-year-old woman, who holds a master's degree in psychology. "I have always been good with dates and places and facts. When you change around the facts, you alter the history."

That raises a broader concern by the local woman who, since embarking on a genealogy study that traced her lineage to Miss Mansfield, has come to the conclusion that *The Miracle Worker* fell short in a more critical sense than dramatic license:

"Nobody (watching the play) knew who Annie Sullivan was; where she came from; what she was doing there. She just came from nowhere.

"There were a few flashbacks to Annie — and nobody really gets it," said Miss Burke.

The play worked to the audience's delight, she believes, because of the two actresses who won Academy Awards for their performances: "Anne Bancroft (as Annie) and Patty Duke (as Helen) were more than perfectly cast; they were magic together," Miss Burke said.

They starred in the Broadway play in 1959 and the film produced in 1962. Gibson published the play in 1956.

A close reading of it bears out the reasons for Miss Burke's objections. Except for an extended dialogue with the director of the Perkins Institution who offered Miss Sullivan's services to the Kellers, there are only a few brief and scattered vignettes of Miss Sullivan's past.

There is a sense that Miss Sullivan had suffered a terrible loss when her little brother Jimmie died in the almshouse, and that at the end of *The Miracle Worker* she

could love someone again in her relationship with Helen.

"Unless one knows something about Annie Sullivan prior to his play," Miss Burke said, "they will learn very little of her from it.

"*The Miracle Worker*, for what it is worth, was a good piece of work, but it didn't tell the audience about Annie Sullivan," Miss Burke said.

Moreover, even aside from the title — demonstrating that the play was about the teacher and not the pupil — Gibson openly acknowledges that Annie Sullivan was the reason he wrote the play.

Calling the public "myopic" because it continued to see his play as "about Helen Keller," Gibson said that a hundred times he's been asked about his interest in Miss Keller.

"I reply patiently," he says in the introduction to his unsuccessful followup play, *Monday After the Miracle*, that "I was never interested in her, the play is about Teacher, and for that reason is not named *The Miracle Worker*."

Gibson said he fell in love with the letters which Miss Sullivan wrote to her Perkins Institution house mother Sophia C. Hopkins, in which *Teacher* describes in detail the evolution of ideas and language between her pupil and her.

Miss Burke said she has been researching the life of Miss Sullivan for almost two years. She has visited and made numerous phone calls to the Perkins School for the Blind where Miss Sullivan graduated just prior to teaching Helen, who also was schooled there; traveled to Agawam where she was born, obtaining Miss Sullivan's birth record and early information; spoken with officials in Tewksbury where the Almshouse was; and came of course, to Wrentham, where Annie and Helen lived together for 2 years.

The "big mistake" of *The Miracle Worker*, Miss Burke says, is that Gibson opened the play with Helen becoming deaf and blind.

"This put the focus on Helen rather than on Annie ... He continues to focus on her and her family throughout the play when instead the focus should be on Annie.

"Afterall," she said, "one does not write a play for the lead while giving the lead to the supporting character."

Gibson, who lives in Stockbridge Mass., subsequently wrote a sequel to focus on Annie Sullivan. It bombed on Broadway in 1982 after seven performances.

Miss Burke wasn't impressed by the redirected effort.

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WRENTHAM — Helen Adams Keller was born June 27, 1880, or 83 years ago this coming Thursday, on a large farm in Tusculumbia, Ala.

She was a happy, normal baby until she was nearly two years old, when she was stricken with a severe illness that damaged portions of her brain, leaving her without sight and hearing. Because she could not hear, she also was unable to speak, and a pitiful future appeared to be in the offing.

But then, when she was seven, Miss Anne Sullivan came into her home, and into her life, from the Perkins Institute for the Blind at Watertown.

Under Miss Sullivan's tutelage, Helen began to learn to express

use of a hand alphabet. Then she learned Braille and how to use a Braille typewriter. By the age of 16, the deaf, dumb and blind girl had learned to speak and was attending school.

Miss Keller progressed with such rapidity that despite her handicaps she was able to enter Radcliffe College, from where she was graduated, cum laude, in 1904, getting a BA degree.

In order that she might stay in Massachusetts, the people of the city of Boston took up a collection and purchased a farm in Wrentham for Helen and Miss Sullivan, who stayed by her side.

This farm, located on East Street, Route 140, is now numbered 349, and is presently occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Stuart Cottrell; their daughter and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Coffery, and several grandchildren.

Miss Keller sold some shares of sugar stock she had received as a gift, to make changes in the farmhouse which had a fine apple orchard in back. One of the features of the house, which still predominates the exterior, making it different from the other houses in the neighborhood built in the same style, is a second-floor balcony which protrudes from the side and which gave Miss Keller easy access from her bedroom to the outdoors.

Trees which reached over the rail afforded the blind girl the soft touch of leaves and swaying branches in the wind, and she could even "hear" the singing of the birds by the vibrations which traveled down the tender branch stems.

Inside, the company of Keller and Sullivan supervised the building of a special stairway, for the convenience of the young woman, still sightless, but with better "vision" than many around her. The stairway was constructed in stages, five steps and a landing, four steps and a landing, etc., so that Miss Keller had no doubts as to how far she had to go. The stairway remains the same to this day.

A large dining room was added to the back part of the house for more room. It has since been detached from the main portion and now is located next door, being used for the showroom of Birmingham Furniture Co., 361 East St.

In addition to her academic accomplishments, Miss Keller was not adverse to hard physical labor, as evidenced by the stone wall which still stands in front of the house near the street, including the entrance gate posts which still remain firm and in good condition, which she helped to build. During this construction, of which

"The Song of the Stone Wall" which was later published in her book of essays, "The World I Live In."

Miss Keller lived in Wrentham from 1905 to 1917, during which time Miss Sullivan married John Macy, the ceremony being performed by a close friend of Miss Keller, Dr. Edward Everett Hale. While in Wrentham, Miss Keller traded with Pierce's Market, read the Boston Transcript for news—that is someone read it to her—and called on Dr. Braston, a nearby veterinarian to treat her dogs. She liked to ride the trolley cars which rumbled past her home from Wrentham to Foxboro, especially the open cars which permitted the wind to blow through her hair.

She had one exciting experience with a trolley car one fall day when her horse and cart was taking her back from town. The horse shied from an especially noisy car passing by and bolted, smashing the carriage into the stone wall and breaking it into pieces. Fortunately, Miss Keller was not hurt seriously, but the horse was found in nearby Plainville the next day, in a wild condition. Miss Keller sold the horse to the man who found it.

A number of celebrities who were friends of Helen Keller were frequent guests at her Wrentham home, including the aforementioned Dr. Edward Everett Hale, Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain), Alexander Graham Bell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charlie Chaplin, the comedian, and Phillips Brooks. Listed in Who's Who in America, Miss Keller met with many celebrities in her travels away from home, including President's Cleveland and Taft.

In 1916, Miss Sullivan, who had become Mrs. Macy, was taken quite ill and was sent to Lake Placid, N. Y., for her health. The following year, Miss Keller sold her Wrentham home, which she had come to love but was unable to keep up. The orchards had fallen prey to the deer which abounded in the neighborhood, stripping the bark and leaves from trees; and the lawns had grown into tall grass. The house needed repairs out of reach of the blind and deaf but no longer dumb woman.

The house was later used as a rest home for the working girls of the Jordan Marsh store of Boston, with tennis courts and other recreational facilities available. Now it is a quiet home in Wrentham, passed by hundreds daily, who are probably unaware of the history which still lives and breathes in its tree-shaded confines.



#### A WALL SHE HELPED TO BUILD

... Physical labor was no stranger to deaf and blind Helen Adams Keller. She helped to build this stone wall in front of the Wrentham house which was her home from 1905 to 1917.

# A bit of Annie Sullivan returns to Wrentham

By Rose Marques  
Gazette Senior Reporter

**A**nnie Sullivan Macy shrouded her miracles with modesty, leaving the world to honor her work as it would. But it rarely did. So believes Cathleen Burke, a Wrentham researcher. Sullivan may have shared her life, work and glory with Helen Keller, but soon the spotlight of recognition will belong to Sullivan alone.

Burke is researching the 70 years of Sullivan's life to write a play she hopes will end up on Broadway. With several scenes completed, Burke continues her research in Wrentham where Annie lived and worked with Keller, where she married John Macy, and where she and her husband parted ways.

Her story has never been told, says Burke — at least not like this. That lack of recognition coupled with an admiration for Sullivan led a frustrated Burke to embark on an exhaustive search for details of a life that has not been fully recorded but should have been. She has few crutches to help her: only two books written about Sullivan, one 1959 Broadway play, garbled original documents, and live interviews with elderly persons who may remember Keller or Sullivan.

When she was a child, Burke met Keller but does not clearly remember the encounter today. Still it was not that coincidence that prodded her to her quest. Nor was it her loose connection to Sullivan as a distant Irish cousin. Rather it was a mounting devotion for the eccentric Sullivan she discovered while studying genealogy that fueled her fire.

With the play's completion expected in late summer, Burke has

**'Even at my coronation, Helen is queen.'**

— Annie Sullivan Macy

been and will continue contacting theaters in Connecticut and New York. Some of them already have expressed interest in Sullivan's life story.

#### Knowing Sullivan

Beside the marker in memory of Keller on the town common should be a marker for Sullivan, who brought Keller's genius to fruition, says Burke. Keller, who was once thought to be mentally retarded because she was blind and deaf, eventually graduated from Radcliffe. Burke says even Keller often questioned where she would be without Annie.

In 1933, three years before Sullivan died, she and Keller received honorary degrees from Temple University. Burke details: After the commencement ceremony, attention shifted completely to Keller, leaving Sullivan to remark privately: "Even at my coronation, Helen is queen."

Annie Sullivan was born on April 4, 1866, in Agawam and christened Johanna Sullivan. Her insatiable desire for knowledge and natural brilliance led this legally blind orphan to attend and graduate from Perkins School for the Blind, once located in South Boston. After several eye operations, she regained much of her sight and went to Alabama where her story with Keller would begin.



Cathleen Burke works on her play as a sketch of her subject, Annie Sullivan, offers some inspiration. (Gazette photo by Rose Marques)

Sullivan had always been rebellious, so encountering and taming a savage Keller was a manageable though monumental task. There she taught Keller to communicate, thereby annihilating the silence that had trapped a scholar.

Usually, the story stops there, says Burke. But people need and want to know what happened after the "miracle worker" accomplished her goal.

Burke's play, a comedy-drama, will depict Sullivan's life from her youth to her death, including the years the pair spent in Wrentham. It was their Wrentham experiences that compelled Burke to come here in March.

Sullivan and Keller spent their summers between 1898 and 1900 enjoying Wrentham's beauty from their Franklin Street home, known as the red ruin. While there, the pair often enjoyed the lakes — a perfect haven when Sullivan did not feel social enough to visit with Keller's friends and preferred instead to hide under a canoe for solitude.

They left the area so Keller could study at Radcliffe. For the next two years, the pair shared an apartment together closer to the college. In total, the two women lived together for 50 years — a fact few people know, says Burke.

In 1903, they returned to Wrentham. Still living with Keller, Sullivan bought a home here at 349 East St. and was later married there. Burke would like the site to be designated a historic one.

Despite the distinct recognition Burke hopes to give Sullivan, she knows Keller and Sullivan were always inseparable and will always remain so. Burke quotes from her research that Sullivan was mother

to Keller in heart and mind. Sullivan gave her life without giving her birth, she says.

#### Devoted teacher

Burke says Sullivan was one of the first teachers of handicapped individuals who treated them as if they were not impaired. "She was the inventor of behavior modification," says Burke, herself a teacher of profoundly to severely retarded children.

Sullivan's devotion as a teacher was displayed in all her work with Keller, even as she allowed Keller to put her hand down Sullivan's throat to feel the different vibration of words so Keller would learn to speak like an average individual and not like deaf people often do, says Burke.

Burke quotes Sullivan as saying she gagged often and thought she'd throw up, but she never did. Eventually, Keller learned to speak five languages fluently.

Keller always called Sullivan "Teacher," as if it were her first name, says Burke. She points out a quotation from a book Keller herself wrote: "To others besides myself, (Teacher) was a fountain of encouragement to unfold their finer selves."

Through the years, this teacher seems to continue her mission: Burke says Sullivan is the same moving force in her own life today. Burke has learned much from Teacher — but not only about her life. Burke has acquired Sullivan's zest for life. She has cultivated a greater understanding of the long-lasting effects today's accomplishments can have on tomorrow.

Burke's play will be one accomplishment dedicated exclusively to commemorate Teacher's historic milestones.



Cathleen Burke visits the old home of Annie Sullivan on East Street. (Gazette photo by Rose Marques)

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# Spurred by meeting the 'pupil,' Miss Burke continues a mission

By MICHAEL D. HOLTZMAN  
Staff Writer

(See related story, Page 1)

**WRENTHAM** — When Cathleen Burke was taking a psychology course in family therapy in Connecticut, there were no magic voices whispering: "If you build she will come."



Miss Burke

But her mission evolved as it did obscurely and compellingly as it did for Ray Kinsella building a ballfield for Shoeless Joe.

It even resulted in the West Street resident recently changing her name a bit.

Miss Burke, 35, was completing her master's degree at Southern Connecticut State College during the spring of 1989 when she took the course. It included tracing one's genealogy.

"I knew Annie Sullivan was in my family and I thought, 'Gee, I don't know anything about her.'"

She began by pulling out the family maps and talking with relatives. After receiving her degree and looking for employment, she began re-reading *The Miracle Worker*. She hadn't read the play since she was 10 — when she thought Anne Bancroft was "a meanie" as Helen Keller's teacher.

"Kit" Burke works a 50-hour week managing a Cumberland Farms store on North Main Street in Bellingham in between writing a play, *Teacher*, and establishing the new Annie Mansfield Sullivan Foundation Inc.

She dreams of creating a museum, school and library in the 19th

century colonial homes once owned by her "Cousin Annie."

But two years ago, the pace was different; it was more searching, more like Kinsella driving those hundreds of miles in a pickup truck with a famous writer to Fenway Park for some unknown reason.

Miss Burke had a late aunt named Molly Lyons who told her about Annie Sullivan about the time *The Miracle Worker* came out. The youngster hadn't been interested.

After she put together her geneogram at college, however, the link grew clearer. Like Annie Mansfield's folks, the Lyons family on her mother's side had emigrated from Ireland during the potato famine of the 1840s.

Going back five generations to Ireland, there was a relative who married a Closely, which is the family of Annie Sullivan's mother, Alice Closely.

"I had to learn more about her," said Miss Burke during recent weeks of interviews. "That's where it all began."

And just as every *Field of Dreams* story has a Doc Graham who had missed — but not really — that one magic moment to lay wood on the ball, so does this one.

It happened around Fairfield Beach. Cathleen, whose first name is actually Johanna — like Annie's actually is — had gone as a young child to the beach cottage of a friend.

The children were playing when a deaf-blind woman was led over to them. It was Helen Keller, then about 80 years old.

"It was a sudden thing," said Miss Burke. Her only memory was having a "warm, peaceful feeling" from Miss Keller, but it was also "scary."

"She spoke strangely, and I couldn't understand all that finger spelling," she said.

Later, Miss Burke learned that Miss Keller loved children and enjoyed being around them.

Miss Keller, who died in 1968 at age 87, had been living in Easton, Conn.

After completing her degree, Miss Burke went to the library in Westport where she grew up. She traveled to the Perkins School for the Blind and numerous other places to track Miss Sullivan's history. "Every day, it was like my life. Like somebody would read the Bible or go to church, I would read about Annie."

"I kept looking for Annie, and I kept finding Helen," she said.

She drove to Wrentham for the first time in September 1989, having learned about the many years Miss Sullivan and Miss Keller lived here.

She read published letters saying that Wrentham was Miss Keller's happiest home, and "Teacher" was at her best here.

In March of the following year, she took the leap, started cutting down the cornfields, so to speak.

She returned and in two days had a job and a place to live. She even lived for a week in a vacant apartment that May at the former Sullivan-Keller home at 349 East St.

And the name? Almost two years ago she legally changed her name to Cathleen Mansfield Burke. "I did it to strengthen my connection to Cousin Annie and carry on her memory," she said.

"I have a tremendous feeling that this is meant to be," she said.

If she builds it ...

## Teacher and Her Pupil

## Annie's strength, spirit shine in 'Teacher'

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Around the turn of the century, Annie Mansfield Sullivan spent 20 years in Wrentham with her "miracle" pupil, Helen Keller, living for much of that time at their home on East Street.

This is the fourth segment in the four-part series, which began Sunday centering on the recognition a Wrentham woman and distant cousin of the late Miss Sullivan seeks to establish for her.

The final installment is an analytical look at the classic play "The Miracle Worker," and the writing of a new play — focused on the intent of the original — called "Teacher."

By MICHAEL D. HOLTZMAN  
Staff Writer

Cathleen Mansfield Burke's original play grew from the best of creative notions: desire.

"I read about the different things in her life," she said of Annie Mansfield Sullivan, her distant cousin whose life out of a Charles Dickens novel inspired Miss Burke almost two years ago.

"I'm very visual," said Miss Burke, who is also a musician and who played for five years in a country band. "Cousin Annie's life unfolded in my mind's eye. I would think: 'What would they say?'"

"I was conscious of it all the time."

That was two springs ago, when Miss Burke was living with her friends John Hosier and Janice Ruddy in Connecticut. "We got talking about theater and Annie's story and William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*."

"I said, 'I should just rewrite this.'" Her friends, including Ms. Ruddy, a musician and actress who is 14 years younger than Miss Burke — the same age span between Helen and Annie — encouraged the first-time playwright.

Since then, the ongoing writing of *Teacher* has been Miss Burke's passion.

## A rewrite takes shape

"My play opens with a scene of Annie's earliest recollection of her



childhood, at age 5. She sits on her mother's knee. Annie has trachoma, the eye disease of the unwashed poor.

"Her parents are Irish immigrants. Annie's mother is dabbling her eyes with a geranium solution," said Miss Burke.

"This is her play — at last — and I claim it right from the start. The play spans Annie's lifetime (1866 to 1906). We learn about her, who she was and who she wasn't, where she came from and where she went.

"And while 50 of those years were happily spent with Helen, the play keeps Annie in focus," Miss Burke said.

In *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller's first book, a letter by Miss Sullivan detailing Helen's early progress describes how the child first connected the meaning of water and began to learn.

It read: "A new light came into her face. She spelled 'water' several times. Then she dropped on the ground and asked for its name and pointed to the pump and the trellis, and suddenly turning round she asked for my name.

"I spelled 'Teacher.' " Annie Sullivan's letter said.

Miss Keller never called her anything else.

"I know the audience will like Annie. In fact, they will love her," Miss Burke said. "She has her triumphs and sorrows, as we all do. But her life was more dramatic than most.

"Somehow through it all, Annie's spirit, strength and determination keep going.

"The audience will also get to know Helen Keller, and as always, they will truly adore her," she



Call Photo/Lynnda Reed

## The writing of 'Teacher'

Cathleen Burke talks from her West Street, Wrentham, home about her original play, "Teacher," about the life of Annie Mansfield Sullivan. Almost two years in the works, "it is my gift to Annie," says the author.

continued. "They also will get to know John Macy, Annie's husband of 14 years, and will hopefully understand and somewhat like him."

## Making progress

Miss Burke has written most of Acts II and III and the beginning of Act I. In the beginning of Act II, she offered, Annie goes to the Gilman School for Young Ladies in Boston to see Helen. Arthur Gilman, the school operator, attempts to separate Annie and Helen so he may claim Helen as his prized pupil.

Annie refuses to leave his office until she sees Helen. Gilman pushes Annie to the limit, saying: "Miss Sullivan, your teaching methods are unhealthy for her and it is time you let her go. After all, Miss Sullivan, she is not your child!"

"Annie was a very outspoken woman," said Miss Burke, "and her response to Mr. Gilman becomes a most moving monologue that tells the audience just how she feels about Helen and how Helen feels about her."

playwright emphasizes the independence Teacher wanted for Helen. That, of course, contrasted with their complex dependency upon one another.

## Serious issues

But at this point in her life, shortly after her marriage to Macy, a noted literary critic from Harvard, Teacher is talking with Helen about adult issues, in this case socialism and religion.

As she does throughout the play, Annie talks in the manual alphabet to Helen, with a voice over for the audience:

Annie (exasperated): Helen, you are an impassioned reformer by temperament.

Helen (frustrated): Teacher, just this once won't you agree with me? Annie: No, I will not agree with you when I disagree with you.

Helen: I don't understand how the woman who has been a mother to me can so strongly oppose my beliefs.

Annie: Yes dear, I am your mother in heart and mind, but I do not own you. And it pains me deeply not to believe as you do. We differ on many issues. You are a socialist, I am not. You believe in eternal life, but I am content that death should be final except that we live in the memories of others. I just don't want to change your beliefs. I just want to keep an open mind. So let us agree to disagree.

Helen: Agreed!

In the play, the dialogue is taken, in part, from the letters of Annie, Helen and John and others who knew them well in some capacity, including Helen's last care giver, Winifred Corbally, who at 95 lives in Connecticut.

Another interesting sidelight of Miss Burke's *Teacher* is that it may include several songs. Showing how the play is still evolving, Miss

Burke originally had Helen singing the song *The Three of Us*.

While Miss Keller's spoken English was not easily understood, the playwright countered any objections by saying Miss Keller always wanted to sing: "Helen has mastered five languages and graduated cum laude from Radcliff. Why can't she sing one damn song!"

Just last night, Miss Burke said she was changing the scene. "I cannot make her sing," she said. "I want to ... (But) I don't have to make anything up."

## Reaction to play

While Miss Burke knows her aspirations for *Teacher* — Broadway! summer theatre in Wrentham! — are a long shot, she has already gained significant feedback from theatre people. That includes an actress friend who temporarily played the lead in Broadway's *Evita* and a community theatre director in her hometown of Westport, Conn.

A year ago, the Ridgefield Theatre in Connecticut did a cold reading of several scenes. Members said it was smooth, and the characters came to life, Miss Burke said. In one scene, *Teacher's* face comes to life when even at age 64 she recollects Helen's first spoken word: "H."

"Why is Annie's rightful place in history so important?" asks Miss Burke.

"Annie Sullivan was a century before her time. Her original thoughts on education have only been implemented in the past 20 years. She laid the foundation for behavior modification before B.F. Skinner was born.

"She was a natural-born teacher," continued Miss Burke. Annie was truly the epitome of the word "Teacher." She made a positive contribution to society. She must be remembered."

# Teacher and her pupil drew strength from each other ... and each grew



**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Around the turn of the century, Annie Mansfield Sullivan spent 20 years in Wrentham with her "miracle" pupil, Helen Keller, living for much of that time at their home on East Street. This is the third segment in a four-part series centering on the recognition a Wrentham woman and distant cousin of the late Miss Sullivan seeks to establish for her.

By MICHAEL D. HOLTZMAN  
Staff Writer

WRENTHAM — Where God's creation is recited in the Bible — from darkness He brought light — it might serve as the metaphor for the window opened by teacher Annie Mansfield Sullivan for Helen Keller, her pupil, a century ago.

"Poetry and music were her allies. In her fingers words rang, rippled, danced, huzzed and hummed. She made every word vibrant to my mind — she would not let the silence about me be silent," Miss Keller wrote about Miss Sullivan in 1955, in *Teacher*, the last of 10 books written by the deaf-blind scholar.

In 1887, just a month after she began to teach 6½-year-old Helen, Miss Sullivan wrote to her trusted confidant at the Perkins Institution: "I shall talk into her hand as we talk into a baby's ears. I shall assume that she has the child's capacity of assimilation and imitation.

"I shall use complete sentences in talking to her ... I shall do all I can to interest and stimulate (her mind), and wait for results," she wrote Sophia C. Hopkins, her house-mother at Perkins.

That was just days after the famous breakthrough with Helen at the water well, which research shows is overdramatized in the play *The Miracle Worker*.

Annie Sullivan was first called

"the miracle worker" by Mark Twain, a phrase that would ironically become shifted to her pupil by the American public. But, perhaps the heights of that miracle is only half-measured in Helen Keller.

The rest lay hurried amid deprivation, entangled by the dark thickets of Miss Sullivan's roots and homelessness.

**A difficult childhood**

She was born April 14, 1866, in Agawam, Mass., near Springfield, the oldest child of poor immigrants from Limerick, Ireland. She was named Johanna Sullivan — but called "Annie" by her parents. Her middle name, Mansfield, came later.

By about age 5, Annie had contracted trachoma, a chronic, progressive virus which scars the cornea and leads to blindness. It was called "the disease of the unwashed poor."

Her father was a drunken, sometimes-abusive, itinerant farmer, and her mother suffered from tuberculosis. She died when Annie was eight, after giving birth to five children, two of whom died as infants.

Her father, Thomas, tried for two years to care somewhat for the three children, even taking Annie to have her eyes checked by a doctor. She fondly remembers the many Irish myths her father would tell her, such as the one about the River Shannon and how one drop from its waters would cure her eyes.

But at age 10, her father abandoned them. Two of the children, Annie and her brother Jimmie, 7, who suffered from a diseased hip, were taken to live at the Tewksbury Almshouse. Annie was listed as "legally blind."

During that time, the almshouse cared for an average each year of 940 men, women and children. Disease and death were rampant, especially among children.

Four months later, Jimmie died in the almshouse. Annie wrote: "(I) kissed and kissed his face — the dearest thing in the world — the only thing I had ever loved.

"... When I got back, I saw they put Jimmie's bed back in its place. I sat down between my bed and his empty bed, and I hoped desperately to die. I believe very few children have ever been so completely left alone as I was."

**Determined student**

"Annie's life is out of a Charles Dickens novel," says Cathleen Mansfield Burke of Wrentham, the distant cousin who is working to

educate the public about what Miss Sullivan had to overcome and what she accomplished.

Four years after entering the almshouse, Annie Sullivan beseeched a visiting trustee of the Perkins Institution to let her attend his school. She was 14 and could not write her name.

Ill-mannered, fiesty, yet somehow a lover of Shakespeare, she was endearingly nicknamed there "a little rebel in rags" by Mrs. Hopkins. During that period, she had nine eye operations, which restored a large portion of her lost sight.

Six years later she graduated from Perkins, the valedictorian among her small class of eight students. She would return years later to Perkins with Miss Keller to help further her pupil's education.

It is not widely known that Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller might never have met if it were not for the intervention of someone whose fame is more lasting than either teacher or pupil: Alexander Graham Bell.

He was a dear friend to both of them for the rest of his life. The telephone inventor had a deaf wife and was also a teacher.

In 1887, Miss Keller's mother, Kate, had read Dickens' account of Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe's work with Laura Bridgeman, a deaf-blind woman at Perkins who gained national attention for her educational progress.

Captain Arthur Keller, Helen's father, subsequently contacted Bell in Washington, D.C., on Bell's advice, Keller wrote to the Perkins Institution, and received, in part, this reply from Michael Anagnos, the director:

"I can recommend to you a young lady as governess of your little daughter heartily and without any reservation. Her name is Miss Annie M. Sullivan."

**Teacher meets pupil**

On March 3, 1887, at age 20, homeless and without family, the young woman reached Tuscumhia, Ala., to begin her teaching of Helen Keller. Her only training in the field was she had read Howe's reports about Miss Bridgeman and learned the manual (finger) alphabet.

By that time she had also legally adopted the middle name "Mansfield." It was her attempt to transpose an aristocratic luster over her deprived past.

In order to help her pupil learn, it was said Teacher — as Miss Keller referred to Miss Sullivan repeatedly — used every method and setting available. She began with a belief

that discipline was essential. "The way through knowledge and love is through discipline," she once said.

**A 'remarkable' pupil**

It took only a month for Miss Sullivan to teach her that everything has a name, which she would spell in Helen's palm.

Within three months, Miss Sullivan told Mrs. Hopkins she knew Helen had "remarkable powers ... I had no idea a short time ago how to go to work. But somehow I know now, and I know that I know."

When a few years later she began teaching Helen to speak, it was at the peril of her pupil's fingers — reaching across her lips and tongue and down her throat to feel the vibrating sounds.

A director in special education in Woonsocket, Jeannette Roof, was asked how Miss Sullivan's methods compares with those used today in special education.

"When one is unruly and out of control," said Ms. Roof, who has worked for 15 years in the field, "one draws lines so they can interact with the world and work through their handicaps. This is still a person who can be taught."

"Philosophically and in many ways technique-wise," Ms. Roof said Miss Sullivan used a similar approach. "I would say she definitely was a pioneer in special education."

Asked why Miss Sullivan's contributions are not universally recognized, she stated: "From that success story, you had lots and lots of things happen before special education. You didn't see major social changes in blind-deaf learning."

There are scattered writings from Annie Sullivan, who lived until 1936 but refused to make a case study of her pupil. Some writings were destroyed in a fire, others she disposed of herself. Among the known verses which reveal her compassionate methods is this one:

*"Hands, understanding hands  
Hands that caress like delicate green leaves,  
Hands, eager hands —  
Hands that gather knowledge from great books —  
Braille books —  
Hands that fill empty space with livable things."*

■ **TOMORROW:** The play "Teacher" by Cathleen Mansfield Burke.