

**Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood**  
**President, Rancho La Puerta**



***A biography in her own words...***

Born: San Diego, California

Parents: Edmond and Deborah Szekely

Brother: (deceased): Alex Szekely

Education: BA, University of Oregon. Extensive studies in landscape architecture, ecology, and Spanish

***Career experience/background:***

For ten years I worked with **The Council for Human Rights in Latin America**, a non-profit grassroots organization based in Oregon, as a student volunteer. I had the honor of meeting the most courageous musicians, artists, and human rights activists of the time. I learned a great deal about community organizing, fund raising, running a non-profit organization, and group dynamics. The director was always stretching us to the limit of our abilities. My involvement grew from making hundreds of tamales for soup kitchens to performing in plays, translating songs, painting banners, and helping organize conferences. I traveled to Nicaragua, Chile, and El Salvador. I learned to do the layout for a monthly newsletter in the days of cut and paste. I even kept the books for three years.

My university years made me thirsty to apply the design, landscape, and ecological principals that I was studying in class. **I became part of a group of pioneers that emerged out of the "back to the land" movement in Oregon** and I enthusiastically **supported the newly formed Aprovecho Research Center, near Cottage Grove, Oregon**. Aprovecho is a non-profit research and education center located on a 40-acre rural campus. Here I gathered and refined my practical understanding of green technologies and homesteading skills and later experienced the challenges of establishing a land trust with stewardship agreements and internship programs.

Once I graduated from the University I began **teaching permaculture design** and then **served on the Board of Aprovecho**. I also helped to organize and implement a **three-year soil conservation training program in Nicaragua** and a **Third World Permaculture course based in southern Mexico**. One of the most empowering parts of my life has been to experience the tremendous healing power of the earth when simple techniques and good stewardship are practiced over time.

I began **designing gardens at Rancho La Puerta** before I was twenty. I juggled projects at the Ranch with my life in Oregon as a student and community activist. Rancho La Puerta underwent an extensive expansion and upgrading of its infra-structure in the 1980s, and I stepped more formally into my role as long-range planner, environmental steward, and designer.

I began the **organic farm at Tres Estrellas in 1984** to feed and inspire our guests. Many guests at Rancho La Puerta over the past 25 years have found the farm

to be a highlight of their stay, whether they visit it via a breakfast hike and garden tour, a hands-on cooking class, or simply spending a quiet morning weeding and harvesting in the garden. Many guests return home with the desire and commitment to plant a garden of their own.

***Motivation:***

They say "It takes a village to raise a child" and that was the experience of **my childhood at Rancho La Puerta**. I had tremendous freedom to roam and participate in everything from straightening nails in the warehouse, to wringing laundry, to riding along dusty roads perched on the bumper of a pickup truck. I was a nature child at heart and spent hours quietly observing tadpoles, lizards, and clouds. We had a beautiful cottage garden, a strawberry patch, mulberry and apricot trees, chickens, goats, and horses. I learned about herbal medicine and absorbed a lot of folk wisdom during those years. Our Mexican staff was my family, and the foothills of Mt. Kuchumaa were my home. This "love of place" continues to guide me in everything I do as President of Rancho La Puerta.

***Most rewarding achievements and measured successes:***

The **beauty of Rancho La Puerta is my most tangible achievement**, but I have another role in Tecate as **President of non-profit Fundación La Puerta**, and it is the immeasurable difference that Fundación La Puerta has made in the lives of our young volunteers and the children of Tecate that gives me the most pleasure. One of Fundación La Puerta's most successful projects has been the **creation of Las Piedras Environmental Education Center**. We work with 80 percent of the schools in Tecate training teachers and students. Over 25,000 elementary school children have attended workshops at Las Piedras. These children are now beginning to create their own wildlife and vegetable gardens in their schools. Fundación's **regular Tecate river clean ups** have helped to cultivate a sense of place and a culture of environmental stewardship. During the past two years volunteers have collected over 100 tons of trash, and now the City of Tecate also allocates labor and resources to keep the river clean.

Other community involvement has included being a **board member of the San Diego Natural History Museum** and other endeavors.

I love the excitement of beginning a new design project, but I measure success by what happens when a program takes on a life of its own. By empowering

people in their own community these results are often unexpected and far surpass the original vision.