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Column: Deborah Szekely publishes a book on her 100th birthday



To celebrate her 100th birthday May 3, health spa maven Deborah Szekely publishes a book, "100 Lessons from a Grasshopper." (Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta)

Centenarian health spa founder finds lessons in a grasshopper

BY [DIANE BELL](#) COLUMNIST

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It is amazing to reach 100 years old.

It is even more mindboggling to have founded a legendary health spa, created a museum honoring "new Americans," developed a residential community and authored a book that is published on your 100th birthday.

But then, Deborah Szekely (pronounced say-kay) has been inspiring others with her energy, ideas and indefatigable entrepreneurship for decades.

Ever since she and her late husband, Edmond, a scholar, lecturer and proponent of healthful living, founded a wellness getaway 82 years ago in Tecate just below the U.S. border in Mexico, she has been on the go.

That enclave, initiated as a rustic summer health camp with guests bringing their own tents and paying only \$17.50 a week if they helped with chores, later became known as Rancho La Puerta. It was heralded by Travel + Leisure readers most recently as the No. 1 international destination spa in 2021.

In the introduction to her book, Szekely credits her husband with being an inspirational guru and mentor. She was the worker bee. “From age 18 I ran the day-to-day operations, making sure everyone was fed and housed,” she wrote. That included their goat herd.

“I was the manager and chief cook and bottle washer. I grasshopper’ed from task to task all day long.” Hence, the title of her 6-inch-by-6-inch book, “100 Lessons from a Grasshopper.”

In her foreword, Szekely explains she never actually wrote the content — she verbalized it! Over the years, the wellness pioneer made short quips and observations during lectures and speeches that intrigued and amused two of her Rancho La Puerta staffers, Rob Larson and Peter Jensen. They began jotting them down as “Deborahisms.”

She continues her 40-year tradition of giving weekly lectures at “the Ranch,” although she says it’s now more of a question-and-answer exchange. She doesn’t strive to tell people how to live their lives, she says, but rather prods them to think.

Her book, with its symbolic leafy green cloth cover, is not just a compendium of healthful living tips but an environmental fundraiser. Book sale profits and birthday donations will go to a tree-planting campaign, [Our Green Umbrella](#), to bring shade to parks and neighborhoods in the drought-parched town of Tecate.

“Instead of a bench or a plaque or a wrapped gift for my 100th birthday May 3 this year, I desire only trees,” she said. Her goal also is to purchase an \$80,000 truck to water them.

And, of course, there is a 100th birthday party. Instead of highlighting the all-natural cuisine of the Ranch, this one, with 1,300 expected attendees, is celebrating the community of Tecate with its focus on local restaurants, chefs and musicians.

Rancho La Puerta and the more upscale Golden Door, which Szekely founded in San Marcos in 1958 and later sold, are her more visible legacies but, exemplifying her grasshopper mentality, she jumped from project to project and from career to career.

From 1984-1991 Szekely was president of the Inter-American Foundation, a U.S. agency that extends millions in grants to promote community-led development in Latin America and the Caribbean. Szekely calls it “one of the highlights of my life” — a “mind-expanding experience” that saw her working in every country in the Latin America region, except Cuba.

In 1991, Szekely created Eureka Communities, a national training program for leaders and CEOs of nonprofit organizations. In 2008, she established what is now called the New Americans Museum & Immigration Learning Center at Liberty Station.

Szekely long has embraced diversity, writing: “I’m a Jewish Zen Buddhist whose best friends are a Catholic nun and a Swedish Lutheran.”

When asked during an interview the three lifetime achievements of which she is most proud, without hesitation, she starts with her daughter, Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood, who now manages Rancho La Puerta. “The future of the Ranch is in her hands,” Szekely says, “and she’s doing a marvelous job.” (The one thing Szekely regrets is that she didn’t have a big family.)

Second, she points to the publication of “Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide,” a how-to manual for freshman U.S. legislators. It was first funded by Szekely and written at her behest by 12 retired congressional chiefs of staff.

The guide, now in its 17th edition, grew out of the businesswoman’s frustration years ago when she ran for Congress and couldn’t find a reference book explaining how Congress works and what is expected of a legislator.

Third is creation of the Ranch and Golden Door which, she proudly points out, employ close to 800 people.

As to her secret of longevity, she credits proper diet, sleep and exercise but, most important, her Pollyanna attitude that things will work out.

She addresses aging in her book. “Getting old is a gift so many others have been denied. Why stew and fret over another birthday?” Also, “If you’ve kept your mind sharp, you won’t stop to think that your body is 100.”

She can’t believe she is 100. “I still walk a mile every day.” Now, though, she uses a walker because twice she has broken a hip.

She is planning trips to New York City and Washington, D.C., to sightsee and visit friends. And she still spends two days a week at Rancho La Puerta, with no plans to fully retire. “What would I do with myself?”

Her top three life tips are to do good, to surround yourself with smarter people, and to cultivate a few best friends.

But the spa maven’s one over-arching lesson is: “Keep on hopping. Your life will be more enjoyable and never boring.”