



# After Living, Traveling, and Learning Her Way to 100, Deborah Szekely Has Some Advice for You

By Chloe Arrojado

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Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta  
Deborah Szekely turned 100 on May 3.

The cofounder of luxury wellness destination Rancho La Puerta shares life tips as she reaches her milestone birthday.

According to oral tradition, the Native American Kumeyaay Nation revered Mount Kuchumaa in what is modern-day San Diego County. They believed that the Creator God Spirit, Maayhaay, designated the mountain as the central location for acquiring power for healing and peace. Known today as Tecate Peak, this sacred landform is the backdrop for [Rancho La Puerta](#), located about 2.5 miles across the border in Tecate, Mexico, where owner Deborah Szekely has

been sharing her now-legendary blueprint for longevity with others for more than 80 years.

Szekely is known as the “[godmother of wellness](#)” for her role in creating what is considered the first wellness resort in North America, a renowned, 4,000-acre health and fitness destination near the foot of Kuchumaa. And on May 3, she claimed the title of centenarian. Before her milestone birthday, AFAR picked her brain to see if she has some advice that can increase your chances of getting into the triple digits, too.

Szekely will be the first to say she doesn’t have any secrets, at least not any new ones that she hasn’t advocated for decades. In fact, the way she lives now is much like the way she lived in her childhood. Since the age of four, the Brooklyn-born figure has been a vegetarian—her mother was the vice president of the New York Vegetarian Society, which certainly helped the push. Another of her beliefs, being in touch with nature, was something she learned at eight years old, when her family moved from New York to Tahiti to leave the conditions of the Depression.

Soon after graduating from high school at 16, she married Edmond Szekely, a Hungarian professor who was also a natural living enthusiast. By the time she married Edmond, World War II had taken root and the couple moved to California in hope of starting a health camp modeled after the ones Edmond had previously run to teach his philosophies on vegetarianism and healthy living. But when Edmond’s visa expired, the couple moved to the border town of Tecate, Mexico, in 1940 to prevent Edmond from being sent back to Europe, and consequently having to fight in the war as a citizen of a Hitler-backed country.

“There was no electricity, no toilets, no running water,” Deborah recalls. “We had nothing but a piece of land that we rented for \$50 for the year. It had a small building that stored hay, and it had a dirt floor I used to water every day so it became firm and you could sweep it.”

In a town of 400, Deborah and her husband’s neighbors included the nearby mountain, a creek, and a river—all of which could be useful in the pursuit of their summer camp ambitions. So, in the summer of 1940, close to two dozen people came to study Edmond’s teachings as the first guests of the ranch, which was then called the Essene School of Life. Guests were charged \$17.50 a week and they would climb the mountain, meditate, and listen to Edmond’s lectures. Because the couple didn’t have staff, guests also had to help with property upkeep and brought their own tent accommodation.



Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta

Deborah Szekely (right) poses with her daughter Sarah Livia (left), who now serves as president of Rancho La Puerta.

Nowadays, guests are less concerned about working for their keep and more with getting into the 86-room property—which includes an award-winning spa, a cooking school, and an organic farm—as people are on waiting lists “all the time.” Deborah can’t pinpoint an exact time when the ranch began to succeed, but Rancho La Puerta’s reputation grew quickly as wellness entered the zeitgeist. In 1958, she expanded her wellness repertoire by opening Southern California–based [Golden Door](#), a Japanese-themed inn north of San Diego offering spa treatments and fitness activities where Hollywood stars such as Natalie Wood, Elizabeth Taylor, and Oprah Winfrey have come to reset. Although Deborah’s life has come with changes—she divorced Edmond in 1970 and her daughter Sarah Livia eventually took over the reins as president of the resort—she has remained steadfast in her beliefs about wellness.

And over the years, as health and wellness has developed into a multi-trillion-dollar industry, Deborah is wary of the products it sells. She believes convenience commodities like processed foods, in which “every process removes one natural ingredient and substitutes one artificial,” is a problem plaguing society. Other modern-day issues Deborah has witnessed over a century, like climate change, are problems that negatively impact the health of both people and the planet. The river and creek near Rancho La Puerta, once filled with water, have dried up, taking a crucial water source for the land and wildlife with it. Deborah has used her milestone birthday as an opportunity to combat such changes, raising funds for a [tree-planting campaign](#) in Tecate called Our Green Umbrella.

But while the world may seem grim, she cautions against dwelling too much on things you can't control. Instead, there's an attitude of self-responsibility she emphasizes. Deborah believes we owe it to ourselves to find our own inner peace by looking away from our screens and immersing ourselves in the beauty of the world. And sometimes, the best antidote to doom scrolling is by going on a walk—not on the treadmill, but in nature—and by focusing our awareness on the birds and other wildlife around us, we'll find "all kinds of answers."

But maybe not all of them. At the end of the day, living beyond 100 is part mystery, much to the annoyance of a society obsessed with the idea of living forever. Yet there's another lesson to be had in Deborah's life teachings around age: Live well enough, and you won't even need to rely on a number. She claims she feels the same way she did two decades ago and prefers to view her age through the lens of the garden she's cultivated in Tecate.

"The only way I can see my age is in trees I planted 50 years ago," she says. "Today I can't put my arms around them. They're rooted to the land."