

## Deborah Szekely marks a milestone

The godmother of wellness celebrates her centennial birthday



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Deborah Szekely

Deborah Szekely, the legendary spa and wellness pioneer, turns 100 this month with a celebration at Rancho La Puerta, the “health camp” she cofounded 80 years ago in Tecate, Mexico, with her late husband, Edmond Szekely. From its humble beginnings — early visitors brought their own tents — the ranch has expanded into a luxurious yet unpretentious resort, visited by thousands all over the world. Rancho La Puerta now has lush gardens, modern accommodations, winding brick paths connecting individual casitas, gyms and fitness facilities, a 4,000-acre nature preserve, and a cooking school. Guests who visit never want to leave. *Ranch & Coast* Editor-at-Large Andrea Naversen interviewed Mission Hills resident Szekely on the eve of her birthday about the secrets to her long, healthy life, and the lessons she has learned along the way.

**Andrea Naversen:** Your roots in good health began with your parents. What lessons did you learn from them?

**Deborah Szekely:** Just about everything. Truly! Foremost, I learned how important relationships are to happiness and health. My parents never, ever argued, and we had friends galore.

I learned to be an independent thinker because of my mom’s commitment to her children’s healthy diet. I was miserable in school when I came back to the U.S. from living in Tahiti because all my schoolmates liked to share their sandwiches. No one would exchange a half with me because mine was on germinated wheat bread with peanut butter — or something equally healthy. I began to sit on a separate bench with the outliers in class. That was the beginning of my independent thinking.

**AN:** How was your time in Tahiti formative?

**DS:** I was born in Brooklyn, so imagine me as a little girl learning to speak Tahitian and French because I had to. And I did! I still oftentimes think in French. Tahiti gave me a knack for learning languages. In addition to English, I speak Spanish, French, some German, some Italian. Tahitian has faded into the past.

**AN:** What was the “Ranch” like when you and your husband first arrived in Baja?

**DS:** We moved to Mexico in June 1940 and started the Ranch out of necessity.

We charged \$17.50 a week and asked [guests] to bring their own tents. There was no running water and no electricity. All was not hardship, however. The beauty of the valley was — still is — breathtaking. Oaks and sycamores lined a creek that fed into the Tecate River, which ran clean and clear year-round. Now, with the addition of our gardens, which were the creation of my daughter Sarah Livia, we’re like a huge botanical garden set in 4,000 acres of natural landscape.

**AN:**How were you able to transform it into a premier health and wellness resort?

**DS:** Time. Little saplings become trees. We did a good job as hosts and teachers, and people came back. Today, two-thirds or more of our guests are returnees. It's summer camp for adults. Most important, all the fun they're having also changes their lives.

**AN:** You are about to celebrate your 100th birthday! Congratulations! What is your "secret" to longevity?

**DS:** While I've probably (and only *probably*) done the right things when it comes to food, sleep, and exercise, I would say my foremost "secret" to longevity has been my Pollyanna attitude. My life has been stressful and uncertain at times, but I just know and believe that things will work out, and they usually do. I often say, "Do right, eat right, move right, sleep right, think right." I do not worry; I just do my best.

**AN:** Tell me about your new book, *100 Lessons from a Grasshopper*. What is it about?

**DS:** It was never planned as a book. These so-called lessons just popped out when I was speaking to the Ranch guests at evening lectures, and I never wrote them down in advance.

I was with some friends last year in Borrego Springs and one of them — Mary Walshok, Dean of UC San Diego Extension — laughed and said, "There goes Deborah again." This led me to ask the Ranch historian, Rob Larson, who attended every one of my talks for years and recorded many of them and transcribed the tapes, to sift through and find some choice aphorisms and epigrams.

I hope everyone can find a piece of themselves in the book. By the way, I'm the "grasshopper" because my husband used to say I had a "grasshopper mind" — always jumping from one idea to the next.

**AN:** Tell me about your "Green Umbrella" initiative.

**DS:** I'm deeply concerned about climate change, worldwide of course, and its effect on Tecate especially. I'm euphoric that we plan to launch a "Green Umbrella" tree-planting fundraising campaign on my 100th birthday — May 3 of this year. As presents, I wish for only trees, for they are a gift that can bring shade and joy and beauty to many. Little by little, the goal is to create a great green umbrella for the town that has done so much for us and provided us with the most wonderful staff members.

**AN:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**DS:** I want to give a gift to myself soon after my birthday. Instead of writing an autobiography or a daily journal, I hope to do a series of what I'll call my "regular irregular emails." I'll share my worries and concerns, joys and dreams. That should keep me busy another ten years or more!

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