

What it Takes to Reach 100, With Centenarian Deborah Szekely, the “Godmother of Wellness”

A Conversation about Longevity, Legacy & Impact with Erin Hunt Moore



Deborah Szekely (Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta)

“Remember that in everything, you have a choice. You may not be able to choose what happens to you and around you, but you can choose how you respond. I’ve had a good amount of challenging, painful things happen in my life. I’ve lost husbands, a son, people dear to me. I try to honor the good, honor memories, and focus on the many blessings. It’s not always easy, but I feel that my choice of perspective has helped me tremendously in my life.”

Having a long life and living well are not always synonymous. With medical advances, new technology, access to health information and resources, and just plain genetics, life expectancy rates have risen over the years. But whether that equates to living “well” and with quality is another topic altogether. Here, we introduce a new interview series highlighting centenarian leaders who have had a great impact on our communities and world, while tapping into their secrets for a longer, healthier life.

Our first interviewee for this series, Deborah Szekely (pronounced ZAY-kay) is known to many worldwide as the “Godmother of Wellness”: a leader and innovator of the balanced body/mind/spirit fitness movement and a trailblazer of destination wellness travel. She is known for creating spaces which provide deep connection and transformation, attracting guests from around the world, including the internationally-acclaimed [Rancho La Puerta Resort & Spa](#) in Tecate, Mexico and the award-winning [Golden Door Spa](#) in Escondido, California.

Also widely known and respected for her role as a philanthropist, Szekely founded several non-profit organizations, served on a number of prestigious boards, and received Mexico’s highest honor bestowed on a non-Mexican citizen: “The Order of the Aztec Eagle.” In 1978, she founded (COMBO), Combined Arts and Education Council of San Diego County, which has raised over \$25 million to support 21 cultural organizations. Szekely was a U.S. Diplomat, a U.S. Delegate to the UNESCO Conference on Fitness (1977) and the appointed head (by President Ronald Reagan) of the Inter-American Foundation in Washington, D.C. from 1984–1990, an agency dedicated to serving and empowering the poor in Latin American and Caribbean countries. In 2014, Szekely was inducted into the San Diego County Women’s Hall of Fame by the Women’s Museum of California, the Commission on the Status of Women, the Women’s Center at UC San Diego, and the Department of Women’s Studies at San Diego State University.

Szekely recently celebrated two major milestones: her 100th birthday and the 82nd anniversary of the establishment of Rancho La Puerta, which she co-founded in 1940 at the age of 18 with her late husband, Edmond Szekely. It was an honor to speak with her about this milestone birthday, her legacy of wellness, and what it takes to reach 100.

First of all, Happy Birthday to you! We’re honored to have you as our first interview for this series. Reaching 100 is a tremendous milestone and you seemed to have done it with ease. Tell us, how did you celebrate?

DS: Thank you! Honestly, I’m not sure I ever expected to be here at 100! And while not every day feels easy (I walk with a walker now after a fall), I am still keeping active and busy, albeit more slowly. On my birthday, I woke up at Rancho La Puerta (The Ranch, as I call it) as I do every birthday, and was greeted by a traditional mariachi band. I was joined for lunch with countless loved ones — friends, employees, colleagues, all of whom have become

family. The weekend prior, we had a fiesta grande in a city park to celebrate the entire community of Tecate. I know the Ranch would not exist without the people of Tecate that welcomed us 82 years ago. This community is everything to me: it was a very small town of 400 people when we arrived many decades ago. It now has a population of well over 100,000.

I didn't want gifts for my birthday. It was important for me to give back to the community, and do my part in improving our environment and sustainability. That is why we launched the [Our Green Umbrella](#) initiative timed to my birthday week: a campaign to plant trees in Tecate throughout parks, schools, churches and even homes. They are a gift that has no end in sight, for they will grow and grow, beautify and cool Tecate for many years to come. Little by little, we'll create a giant green umbrella for the town that has done so much for us, and provided us with the most wonderful staff members. The idea has its roots at the Ranch, where we've planted so many trees over our 82 years.

Finally, I released a book for my 100th birthday, entitled "100 Lessons from a Grasshopper," filled with various aphorisms, epigrams, and stories gathered from years of talks with Rancho La Puerta guests. The name comes from my late-husband, Edmund, telling me that I had a "grasshopper mind." Profits from book sales will go to Our Green Umbrella and tree-planting campaign for years to come. As I mentioned, I've been busy!

Our readers want to know more about you and your journey. Can you share a bit of your backstory?

DS: I hope you've got some time — it's been a long journey with many chapters! In many ways, I feel as if I was destined to be where I am today, although I'm not sure I would ever have believed that I would end up establishing a world-renowned wellness resort in Mexico or leading a government agency in D.C for many years. That's the beauty of life!

My life began in Brooklyn in 1922. My parents were immigrants. My father was in the garment business, and my mother was a nurse and vice-president of the New York Vegetarian Society. To escape the Depression, my parents moved us to Tahiti in 1930, on a bit of a whim — where we lived for five years. We had quite a life there: simple, but remarkable, especially for kids. We lived on a beach, tending to fish traps, swimming, canoeing. Those years in Tahiti laid the foundation for many important elements of my life: I learned to love languages, quickly learning Tahitian and French as a young girl because I had to. I became a bookworm, often retreating to reading books and practicing piano — daydreaming that I would be a great concert pianist. I wanted to do something special with my life. It was also here that my family and I met my future husband, Edmond Szekely, called "The Professor", by everyone who knew him.

I was only 17 when I married Edmond, a Hungarian professor, psychologist and natural living enthusiast, and a refugee at the time. We moved to Mexico in June of 1940 and started The Ranch out of necessity. Edmond had planned to open a summer health camp in Elsinore, CA, but his visa expired, and he knew that if he was found in the U.S. he would be returned to Europe. As a Jew, that would have been a death sentence for him. So we moved to Mexico. To our loyal friends and guests, location wasn't important and they gladly changed their plans to join us in Tecate. We came to the Ranch without a vision or mission. We saw it as a place to wait out the war while we provided a place to focus on wellness. We charged \$17.50 a week and asked our guests to bring their own tents. There was no running water and no electricity. Tecate, Mexico, was tiny; only about 400 residents. We were true expatriates and basically campers in what was then a remote valley beneath Mt. Kuchumaa. It was very, very different from our Rancho La Puerta of today.

Although very rustic and basic, it was a very special place. The beauty of the valley, especially in spring when we arrived, was breathtaking — and still is. Oaks and sycamores lined a creek that fed into the Tecate River, which ran clean and clear year 'round. The mountain was covered in blue "mountain lilac". 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. Thanks to her, you are always inspired by nature here. Sarah is now the President of Rancho La Puerta and protects our *raison d'être* of living a life in balance: body, mind and spirit.

I have left the Ranch and my home in San Diego for periods of time, including nearly a decade in Washington, D.C. where I was the appointed President of the Inter-American Foundation (IAF), leading initiatives to help the poor in Latin America and the Caribbean. Volunteerism, philanthropy and community have always been at the center of my life, giving me purpose and focus.

Let's jump right into our main focus — longevity and reaching 100 years. Can you share with us five things that you feel have contributed to your status as a centenarian, and what you would recommend that others prioritize in their lives to live better and longer?

DS: Ritual is very important to me — and I have quite a few lifestyle rituals and beliefs that I live by and I believe have positively impacted my life and contributed to why I'm still here!

1. **Start each day right.** To me, that means with intention and gratitude. When you first wake up, take a moment or two in bed to really feel blessed and focus on gratitude, which is incredibly powerful. Appreciate the weather, your family, your health...whatever. Don't meditate or think of the day's tasks. Just communicate with yourself. Think about what a wonderful day it will be and breathe deeply with that in mind. Then stretch in bed. It feels good to greet and

acknowledge your body. Wiggle a bit: your ankles, your middle, your back. I stretch and say, "You're sleeping, get up!"

2. **Move your body.** I really, truly walk a mile each day. Convenient or inconvenient, it's like a pledge of allegiance to myself. When I'm traveling, however, I don't feel guilty about not doing it. I don't try to be perfect. When I was younger and running the Ranch, I ran around all day. I did the same when I was running a federal agency in Washington D.C. I didn't even have a desk. Movement is life: stop moving, stop living.
3. **Surround yourself with the right people.** I believe that who you spend time with matters. Keep close loyal friends; those who will be there when you need them and vice versa. I like to surround myself with people younger and smarter than me — they keep me learning, growing and energetic! Be with positive people — hire staff with a positive outlook, and have positive friends! Outlook is everything!
4. **Remember that in everything, you have a choice.** You may not be able to choose what happens to you and around you, but you can choose how you respond. I've had a good amount of challenging, painful things happen in my life. I've lost husbands, a son, people dear to me. I try to honor the good, honor memories, and focus on the many blessings. It's not always easy, but I feel that my choice of perspective has helped me tremendously in my life.
5. **Beauty matters: weaving beauty into your environment and life will lift you up and carry you through.** Plants and nature, nourishing and beautiful food, art, music. I find this all at the Ranch — the sacred mountains, native plants and trees, the beauty that we share and highlight is food for the soul. I have sought out these things everywhere I have been and lived and have supported access to them for others — as all should have the opportunity to experience the benefits and impact of beauty! These are the things that move us, inspire us, heal us and connect us!
6. **And a bonus point! ~Have an animal friend.** In my case, I have Charley, my King Charles Spaniel. They bring us joy, encourage us to move and are wonderful companions!



Deborah in her happy place at Rancho La Puerta (Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta)

Health and wellness has been a focal point and passion of your life for many, many years. How has this storied body of work helped to make a bigger impact in the world?

DS: Well, I'm not so arrogant as to think I can impact the entire world, but I can have a small impact on anyone reading this. Having just celebrated my 100th birthday, people are, of course, asking me how I've lived such a long life.

The answer is simple: do everything that is right; have the right friends; have the right fun; eat right...do things that are not harmful. It's just a matter of choice.

In the case of Rancho La Puerta, we've had a chance to influence our guests' health and wellness over 82 years. That's almost 4,000 weeks, and most guests stay at least a week. At

over 100 guests a week, we've influenced more than 400,000 guests. And many return with family, friends, colleagues. That is an impact.

We are on the same path today as the day we started 82 years ago. We don't go for the flavor of the month. We stay with basic truths. Guests know our saying, "take the Ranch home," and they do so by changing their own lifestyle and that of their families and even friends. They come home feeling they'll explode if they don't spread the word. You become a preacher of the healthy life. You carry your pulpit wherever you go. Infectious and positive change.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you in your life/career? What were the main lessons or takeaways from that story?

DS: Here's a story that changed my life. From it, I learned to say "yes" to an invitation on the spur of the moment — even if you think you should say no — because it may open doors and lead to something special.

It happened in the early days of the Golden Door, which I created as a 'sister spa' to Rancho La Puerta, but far more exclusive. I was traveling to Los Angeles often to promote the Golden Door and Rancho La Puerta resorts with various magazine editors, radio talk shows — anybody and everybody.

I was in Beverly Hills shopping and met an acquaintance. After the usual "so great to see you's," she told me she had an extra ticket to hear Eleanor Roosevelt speak that evening. Well, I had a hero-worship crush on Eleanor, so of course I said yes. But this was an elegant function, and I was dressed casually. I went to Saks Fifth Avenue at 4 p.m. and they mobilized everyone to help me. I quickly bought a new dress, undergarments, shoes — everything, head to toe. I was ready to go.

I went to the party that night looking very elegant. It was held in an architecturally important house that was being unveiled. Mrs. Roosevelt spoke wonderfully, and afterwards I wandered from room to room. I kept bumping into a woman who was doing the same thing. In about the third bathroom we'd been together in, she said, "We might as well join forces!" We became friends instantly.

Finally, we made our way up onto a roof deck made for entertaining and we decided to sit together at dinner. Her husband joined us, and I found out that he was the West Coast editor of *Life* magazine! Not long after, he gave the Golden Door five pages in *Life*, a page in *Look*, and down the road a story in *Sports Illustrated*...all of this publicity from one chance meeting.

That's how Rancho La Puerta really got on the map. No major magazine would write about the Ranch alone, but they wanted to cover the Golden Door. We had all the celebrities. Eventually, the Ranch got its own sunshine, too.

My gift is liking people. I make friends. So much success came from wandering around a house. Of all the people I could have met in a bathroom!

If you could start a movement that would bring the most amount of impact to the most amount of people, what would that be?

DS: I would focus on a movement for children. Change starts with education and the earlier, the better. We need health and nutrition education in schools, and we need to work on offering healthy lunches. In the US, so many school kitchens are gone because they were too expensive to maintain. Now we have we've educated the next generation about wellness. Health begins in youth and pays off throughout a lifetime.

Through the non-profit we started here – Fundación La Puerta – we teach children about ecology and environmental protection. That should be a course in every school, so children learn that we're part of a phenomenal universe. The future is in all of our hands – it's our responsibility and not our children's – and we all have to be conscious of the fact that we're building tomorrow and each of us must contribute to that.

Do you have a motto in your life that has helped you most - and why?

DS: Learn from experience and make it better! Some things don't sail, don't float, don't work. You find out why. My focus is always how to make something better. Experience is so valuable. A very practical example from operations at the Ranch: if one of my fitness instructors had a class at which very few people were showing up, an instinct might be to think the instructor was doing something wrong. But I might have scheduled the class at the wrong time: after lunch when everyone is a little sleepy. So we started arts and crafts in the afternoon. Our slogan became "Siempre Mejor". Always better. Everything, everything, everything can be better — from the day-to-day to the bigger picture. Walk around with a *siempre mejor* attitude.

What causes are dearest to you, and why?

DS: Sustainability is an important priority to me — more than just a cause, really, but a lens through which to view so much in our lives and world. No matter what you do, you can only improve it if you sustain it! If a program at Rancho La Puerta isn't working, we more than tweak it, we make it so it's sustainable. We make it a classic. Timeless. Also, at the Ranch, we

are dedicated to a sustainable and eco-focused model, a core mission which my daughter and the president of Rancho La Puerta, Sarah Livia, leads with great knowledge. We have been growing food for the Ranch at our own organic farm since the 1930's; our meals are vegetarian, with some sustainably-caught seafood; we use drip irrigation and recycled water; our building designs and materials used are green and energy efficient, and much more. We leave a light footprint.

Beyond our own immediate programs at the Ranch, sustainability also relates to what's happening with our climate and environment. I'm deeply concerned about climate change and its effect on our community of Tecate. The town has been greatly impacted by drought and fire in the last years. Our foundation has helped rebuild homes and provide assistance. The "Green Umbrella" campaign will assist with providing cleaner air, shade and beauty. We're looking beyond that into solutions, at which sustainability is at the heart.

What's next on your top list of priorities? Where do you want to continue to have an impact and how?

DS: At my age, my list of priorities centers on wellness and sustainability and how I can continue to make a difference. I still lecture at the Ranch around wellness and longevity. One place I still contribute is the Center for Science and Public Interest. We stress that the most important thing right now is for the food industry to clean up its act, because this would make such a difference in people's lives. We all have a right to eat food that is good for us and not full of chemicals. I always say, the cumulative effects of 'smidgens of this and smidgens of that' makes a lot of smidgens. Everyone has hundreds of chemicals in their body, accumulated over the years from pre-birth on. We're in a constant battle between common-sense practices that protect people, and businesses that protect their profits rather than people. I have a lot to learn. I always read something for fun and something to learn at the same time. Right now I'm reading Socrates, and he addresses so many problems that we can relate to today.

What is the best way our readers can follow you online?

DS: You can find information about our wonderful programs at the Ranch, as well as information about my latest book and our philanthropic campaigns on our website [here](#), as well as via Twitter and the Metaverse (IG and FB) at @rancholapuerta.

This was so inspiring! Thank you for sharing so much about your journey to 100 with us — and, again, Happy Birthday!