

# AGEIST

PROFILE

## Deborah Szekely, 100: Every Day Is Amazing

From humble beginnings, Deborah Szekely created two of the world's best luxury resorts that have been winning guest loyalty and awards since their inception – in the case of Rancho La Puerta, over 82 years. She shares her life tips, health advice, and the most amazing things she has seen in her 100 years so far.

by David Stewart

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It is not often we get the chance to interview someone with this much life experience and life impact. Deborah Szekely is the Brooklyn-born daughter of immigrant parents – her father was in the garment business, her mother a nurse and vice-president of a New York vegetarian society. To escape the Depression, the family moved to **Tahiti** in 1930 where they lived until 1935. Deborah married her husband Edmond Szekely, a renowned health researcher, philosopher and author, in 1939 at age 17. In 1940, Deborah and her husband founded Rancho La Puerta in Tecate, Baja California, **Mexico**. Visitors paid \$17.50 per week, and were asked to bring their own tent and help with the chores. In 1959, Deborah also opened the famous Golden Door, in Escondido, California.

In 1984, in her late 70s, at an age when most of her contemporaries were retired, she saw a glaring need and initiated *The Congressional Management Guide*, now in its 17th printing, to help incoming congress people orient themselves and their staff to their new jobs.

Deborah lectures and continues to work two days a week at Rancho La Puerta. Her lively and humorous weekly talks to gatherings of Ranch guests explore the principles of living the longer, healthier life and advocating health reforms in American communities. Deborah's propensity to be a night owl continues, with her still working late into the night.

The Ranch is an extraordinary place, demonstrated by the fierce loyalty of the people who go there: over 70% are return guests, and many have visited dozens of times. It has received hundreds of awards over its 82 years, including *Travel + Leisure* magazine Readers' Poll "World Best Destination Spa", and *Condé Nast Traveler's* Best in Mexico.



*What is one life tip you'd like to share?*

Can I share three?

First, do good! If you're hurting people, you're hurting yourself. It's a law of nature. We're like plants; water us, and we thrive.

Second, surround yourself with people smarter than you. That's where I got my education. Some of my friends today are still my role models and teachers.

Third, cultivate a few best friends. Support one another. A true friend is one you can call in the middle of the night, say "I need help!" and they will be at your side in minutes. True friendship involves loyalty. The friend becomes family... perhaps more than your own relatives.

**"Instead of a bench or a plaque or a wrapped gift for my 100th birthday May 3 this year, I desired only trees"**

*What is the most amazing thing you have seen in your lifetime?*

Again, I must say that there has been more than one. Every day after 100 is amazing. Of course, there have been more specific examples. My husband was burned terribly and not expected to recover, but he did. On a happier note, I shook the hand of Eleanor Roosevelt, a great lady I could not have admired more. For sheer beauty, seeing the forest in Mexico where millions of monarch butterflies from North America spend the winter.

*Do you still have any life goals? If so, what?*

I'm concerned about climate change's effect on Tecate in Baja California, and I'm euphoric over our plan to launch a "green umbrella" tree-planting campaign there. Instead of a bench or a plaque or a wrapped gift for my 100th birthday May 3 this year, I desired only trees. It's a gift that has no end in sight, for it will grow and grow, and cool Tecate for many years to come.

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

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. They were always a little bit different, which was fine. We had no money, so we made friends instead. Mom started a vegetable garden wherever we lived, and my job was to deliver extra vegetables to neighbors. For example, we lived in Marin County when we returned from Tahiti, and we became part of the community quickly.



An early image of Deborah.

### **“I learned how important relationships are to happiness and health”**

Mom was a health nut and was a registered nurse at People’s Hospital in Brooklyn. She said it was “a place where everyone came to die,” so she set out to live her life, and our family’s lives, with good health a priority. She truly had an exercise routine. I watched her do old-fashioned calisthenics. They were old-fashioned back then, but they worked, and she had a great figure. She loved hiking, and always joined a hiking club whenever we moved. In summer we would go to different health camps in Mexico or Southern California. That was her summer community. 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 US from living in Tahiti because all my schoolmates liked to share their sandwiches at lunch hour; they would exchange halves. 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. I wasn’t going to sit with the sharers anymore! That was the beginning of my independent thinking.



*What is your “secret” to longevity?*

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.

### **“Beware of what I call “The Smidgens””**

*How can we all live healthier, happier lives, no matter what age?*

If I had to name one major action you can do, it’s this: beware of what I call “The Smidgens.” If you add one little packet of artificial sweetener to your tea every day, those little “smidgens” someday add up to a dump truck full of smidgens. And so it goes with any smidgen that can be bad for you. They add up.

Another: When you **wake** up, don’t pop right out of bed. Instead, spend 10 minutes feeling blessed and grateful for all the gifts that you have been given. Get your day started on the right foot.

*What is your proudest accomplishment?*

My three lifetime achievements of which I am most proud are: my daughter, Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood, who now manages Rancho La Puerta and is doing a wonderful job; the publication of *Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide*, a how-to manual for freshman US legislators; and third, the creation of The Ranch and Golden Door.

*[Learn about Rancho La Puerta.](#)*