

# At 102, Deborah Szekely Is Still Setting an Example at Mexican Wellness Spa Rancho La Puerta

By Danielle Bernabe April 8, 2024 12:06 pm ET



Few are better qualified to run a wellness resort than a thriving centenarian.

Deborah Szekely, now 102 years old, has led such establishments beginning in 1940 with Rancho La Puerta in Tecate, Mexico, followed by her founding the Golden Door in San Marcos, Calif., in 1958. Both destinations are still revered as health and wellness sanctuaries.

Szekely continues to oversee Rancho La Puerta—or “the ranch,” as it’s affectionately known—ensuring that from dawn until dusk, guests immerse themselves in a regimen of healthful eating, spa treatments, meditation, lectures, and an extensive compendium of fitness activities ranging from pickleball to Pilates, and seemingly every other source of mind and body engagement imaginable. The schedule is rigorous and exhilarating, and if you’re not smiling as you move from one activity to the next, you’re not doing it right.

“The ranch is located between two mountains,” Szekely says, with “la puerta” meaning “the door” in Spanish. “And for many people, it’s the door to a new life. That’s why they come here: to open that door again, and each time, they receive different messages, depending on what they’re ready for.”

Szekely’s commitment to health started early on. She’s been a pescatarian since childhood and used physical chores, such as chopping wood and carrying heavy tools, as exercise. Her fitness regimen evolved with changing times, and the ranch has always been an inspiration for healthy aging.

“If I’m not fit, guests will notice,” emphasizing that leading by example is a pillar for her longevity. “It doesn’t take a lot of calories sitting at the computer, so I’m active every day. And I make sure guests see me moving.” Now that she’s a centenarian, she takes daily walks through the park with her King Charles Spaniel, Charlie.



Rancho La Puerta in Tecate, Mexico.  
Rancho La Puerta

Longevity offers Szekely the chance to positively impact her guests and the surrounding community. Her activism outside the ranch has garnered her “The Order of the Aztec Eagle,” Mexico’s highest honor for non-citizens. Efforts on the ranch have led to a 60% guest return rate, with some who’ve returned more than 50 times. “Perhaps it’s responsible for my longevity,” she says. “I’m happy, and they’re happy. There’s nothing negative that I do here. I’m very

fortunate.”



Szekely recently sat down with *Penta* to share her insights on the key to wellness and happiness and how these principles have shaped her philosophy on longevity.

***Penta:* What does longevity mean to you, and how was a sense of wellness and longevity brought to your life so early on?**

**Deborah Szekely.** Very early on at Rancho La Puerta, I understood that I had become a role model for others. I realized the importance of this and knew that failing to live up to their expectations could deeply disappoint them. This consistently made me focus on staying fit and healthy. I'm over 100 now, and having all my marbles is very encouraging for them. Also, I'm uniquely positioned to connect with a wide audience. I speak to around 150 people weekly, and I want to look my best and stay in shape. They see me walking laps and maintaining my fitness. Doing this isn't just for me; it's a way to show others the value of health and positive lifestyle choices.

**How have you seen the term wellness evolve over the past several decades?**

The use of that word has definitely grown, and the philosophy of wellness is both physical and mental. Despite "wellness" being more popular now, we've always used good old-fashioned health and exercise. Health is more than eating right; it's also about exercise. At the ranch, everyone starts very early (some as early as 6 a.m.) with hikes up the mountain. But, the specific type of exercise doesn't matter; what matters is that you're pushing yourself enough to feel it, getting your heart rate up, and breaking a sweat. If you get really huffy puffy, you're doing a good job.

**How would you describe your food philosophy as it relates to longevity?**

Food is a way of life. The life in food gives you life, and I never use the word "diet" because I think that's a bad word. It has the word "die" in it, and I've found that diets aren't long-lasting; they die out. I also think fresh food is incredibly important. The time that evolves from when you pick a vegetable and buy it in the market is no less than five days. Often 15 days. My approach is to minimize the time from harvest to consumption, so I eat as fresh as possible. We encourage our guests to visit our farm

and see where the food comes from. We let them pick some of the vegetables that will be used in that night's dinner. We aim to shift perspectives on food so that it's an exciting source of energy and life.

### **Why do you think people come back to the ranch so much?**

The ranch is a happy-making place. And guests know they're doing something for themselves that will be long-lasting. It's no fun going to the doctor. But the ranch is fun, and it keeps the doctor away. It's clear that the majority of our guests are excited about being here. They're not dragged here; they come willingly. And they're actually thrilled to exercise. Imagine that. And that's a huge thing for longevity. It's also about camaraderie. The friendships that form here lead them to return at the same time each year to reunite with those they've met.

### **You mention happiness and positivity a lot. So, how do you stay positive and not let negative things impact you?**

It's hard sometimes to implement that, but it's important. We all have to be our own bosses. We have the ability to reject things we don't like by ducking and going around it. Even if we can't change it, we can go around negative thinking without taking it in. I like to think you can only cry over things that you can change. And while we can make positive changes to many things and as many people as we can reach, there's still a whole world out there we can't change. It's hard sometimes to circumvent that. So it's nice to substitute the thinking. I do that by reading something positive. I just try not to digest the negative evil. Instead, I say, "I can't do anything about it. I'm sorry. Move on."

### **Rancho La Puerta is very involved in the surrounding community of Tecate. Why is that important to you, and how do you feel that community service improves health?**

Community survival is absolutely vital to longevity. The health and happiness of our neighbors are not only important; they are a requirement. Without the health of the things surrounding you, it's hard to be healthy. Engagement with Tecate's community has always been important. Many people who work at the ranch are from the community, and generations of families have worked with us. You can't foster a truly

happy environment if it's isolated from its context. When everyone involved, from guests to local residents, shares in this joy and wellness, it creates a more cohesive and positive experience for all.

**How do you define success, and what's your advice to someone who wants to live longer and be healthier?**

Your impact on others is a key to success. If you help make a better world and a better life for the people you meet, you can help them envision a better world. In return, we may actually get a better world. Part of that is engaging in nature daily because we wouldn't be here without a thriving ecosystem. Begin your day by spending 1- more minutes in bed, reflecting on what lies ahead and the natural beauty that surrounds you. If possible, look at the trees outside your window. I think of trees as my brothers and sisters. We share the same air, and you can breathe in their fresh air and breathe out old air. It's a beautiful thing.