

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

102-year-old still works 3 days a week at the resort she co-founded in 1940: Her best advice for a long, happy career

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Deborah Szekely, 102, co-founded one of the first wellness resorts in North America in 1940. Source: Rancho La Puerta

Deborah Szekely is 102 years old and works three days a week at the fitness resort and spa that she co-founded with her then-husband in 1940.

Rancho La Puerta, Szekely's resort which is considered one of the first wellness resorts in North America, was born at a tumultuous time in her and her husband, Edmond's, lives during World War II.

"We had no money. What happened was the war. My husband was due to go to England, and when we married, we were going to England," Szekely tells CNBC Make It. "But along came the war," and Edmond's U.S. visa expired.

"He was told he had to leave before June 1 or be returned to his country of origin, where his Jewish heritage was a death sentence," the resort's [site](#) states.

The couple traveled to Mexico and Edmond, who was a well-known health researcher and professor, attempted to have his papers renewed but was unsuccessful. "He called me and I said, 'Well, I guess we're gonna be in Mexico,'" Szekely says.

“ I work three days a week, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

Deborah Szekely

102-YEAR-OLD FITNESS RESORT AND SPA OWNER

They settled in Mexico close to the border of San Diego, rented an Adobe-style storage shed and began building the foundation for Rancho La Puerta with a focus on health and fitness through vegetarian meals and exercise classes.

"The guests came because of the Professor; his charisma, his reputation, and to hear his lectures in person, held every day under a huge oak tree," Deborah recounted on the resort's site.

Over the years, Szekely has served many different roles at the resort: chief cook, general manager and activities director. She helped to maintain the resort's farm to have freshly-grown foods for their meals; gardening is a skill which is [common among centenarians in "Blue Zones."](#)

Now, Rancho La Puerta is led by the Szekely's daughter, Sarah Livia Brightwood, who is the resort's president, but Deborah is still heavily involved in the resort's operations.

"We have fabulous speakers every night. I meet with the presenters [every] Tuesday, so I know what my guests are talking about," Szekely tells CNBC Make It.

"Wednesday, I speak. And Thursday, I meet individuals who I want to know, or friends. So I work three days a week, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday."

She also attends rotary meetings to "keep abreast of what's happening at the ranch."

Szekely is often a guest speaker at other events outside of the resort as well, and had one speaking engagement scheduled for just a few hours after our meeting. The guest list for the event were a couple dozen of her closest friends for her 102nd birthday.

Centenarians are often known to [value having great social connections](#) and [tend to develop new friendships often](#).

Szekely is also always looking to learn and takes an interest in new things. "My lectures are Q&A, and I have to be fairly knowledgeable to have Q&A every Wednesday night," she says.

When we met for our interview, she ordered chili cauliflower poppers because she was intrigued by its description on the menu and wanted to try something new.

"The main thing is be learning," Szekely says.

"I read everything. I read the things that interest me, but I read the first and last paragraph for most things, so you get a general understanding. And then if it's really interesting, the first and last paragraph, then you read the [rest]."