

AGING WELL · AGING

## This 102-year-old resort owner knows a thing or two about longevity: ‘I do not allow negative thoughts’

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Oprah Winfrey, Madonna, Kate Winslet, Jane Fonda, and Bill Moyers have all stayed at the famous [Rancho la Puerta](#) wellness resort and spa, an exquisite collection of mountain-edged casitas, pavilions, pools, and gardens on 4,000 acres in Baja California, Mexico.

But the property’s biggest star is Deborah Szekely, who co-founded the ranch with her husband in 1940, and now—at 102 years old—is the embodiment of all the property aspires to deliver: health, [longevity](#), and peace of mind.

“The morning I turned 100, I lay in bed and thought, ‘Huh, I’m 100. What’s different?’ I couldn’t think of anything,” Szekely tells *Fortune*, sitting down recently for an interview in her hotel suite in New York City, where she had flown in from her home in San Diego to speak at two different wellness conferences. “I’ve had a lovely life and when it ends, it ends. But I enjoy it,” she says. “I really, truly don’t take on worries that I cannot do anything about. Otherwise I’d be an old lady! But where I can do something, I do something.”

The Brooklyn native has accomplished a dizzying amount in her life, including starting and running Rancho la Puerta and also the [Golden Door](#), a luxe Japanese spa and resort in San Diego (which she sold in 1998). At 60 she ran for Congress and served as president of the [Inter-American Foundation](#); at 80, she realized a long-held dream and founded the [New Americans Museum and Immigration Learning Center](#) in San Diego.

All are extensions of her formative years, rooted in values such as healthy living, [vegetarianism](#), and sustainability as put forth by her mother, a Jewish Austrian immigrant and “health nut” who was an RN and the vice president of the New York Vegetarian Society who put her family on an all-fruit diet. In 1934, she made a bold decision that changed their lives forever.

“It was the Depression. And my dad was very depressed,” recalls Szekely, née Shainman, who was 12 when her mother caught him examining his life insurance policy, and feared his suicide.

“One day my mom came to dinner and she said, ‘We’re leaving in 16 days.’ And my brother and I and my dad looked at her, and my dad said, ‘Where to?’ ‘Tahiti.’ And we said, ‘Where is that?’ and she said, ‘I don’t know. But here are the tickets.’” She had chosen the destination because of its fresh air and [fresh fruits](#)—both in short supply in New York during the Depression—and soon they all boarded a steamship, spending several weeks traveling by sea to their new home.

“And from then on, we had a different kind of a life,” the centenarian says, adding that she remembers “a lot” from the few years they spent in Tahiti, living a rustic lifestyle in a grass hut, and that she still “thinks in French much of the time” because of her schooling from that time.

While there, the family met another health-minded transplant: Edmond Szekely, aka “the professor,” a Romanian immigrant and burgeoning health guru known for his writings and lectures on philosophy and ancient religions, exercise, and the value of fresh organic vegetables. They all eventually returned to the U.S., and Deborah’s family attended his summer “health camps.” That’s when Deborah decided to work for him and when she and Edmond fell in love. They married when he was 34 and she was just 17.

“I did it as a way of getting out,” she explains. “He was head of the British International Health and Education Society, and he was going to England. And I thought, ‘I will go to England, and if it works out, fine. If not, I’m free. I can go to France.’ And it worked out. So I stayed.”

## **Founding Rancho la Puerta**

The new couple, in search of a place to create a health camp together, found their way to Baja, in part as a way for Edmond to sidestep the fact that he had no immigration papers allowing him to stay in the U.S. There, they settled on a vast piece of land at the foothills of Mount Kuchumaa, writing to friends with invitations to come and stay on the land.

“For \$17.50 a week,” she says, “it was bring-your-own-tent.” It took off, she adds, as “my husband was well-known.”

They created their own permanent tents, soon replaced with cabanas built from surplus army packing crates, and then added vegetable gardens, [exercise](#) classes, a dining hall with mostly raw vegan food (today the menu is pescatarian), and a printing press for Edmond’s books. Advertising in Los Angeles brought in the Hollywood crowd—as it did to the Golden Door, which Deborah created in 1958 after traveling to Japan a dozen times in one year for inspiration.

The couple had two children, and today her daughter, Sarah Livia Brightwood, who has had thousands of trees planted on the property, runs the resort.

“She’s the boss,” says Deborah. “She makes the decisions ... I don’t interfere.” (One of her grandsons—a [professional surfer](#)—is on the board; the other is a recent high-honors graduate of University of Southern California.)

Today Rancho la Puerta, which she calls “the ranch,” is “a small town” with 400 employees. It charges guests \$5,100 and up per person for weeklong packages and is replete with 20 full-time fitness instructors, 11 gyms, a cooking school, an organic farm, three spa treatment centers, programs including group hikes and workshops, and peaceful nature trails for [walking](#)—with not a single golf cart in sight. Of its 10,000 acres, only about 300 are actively used by guests, which is part of a conscious effort towards keeping the footprint as small as possible.

“We do not grow,” says Deborah. “We’re smaller than we were, by design.”

Deborah is at the property three days a week and still holds weekly Q&A sessions with her guests to an always-packed house, often fielding questions about how she’s managed to live such a long and healthy life. People want to know what kind of [water](#) she drinks—a question that makes her laugh—and what her skincare routine is, to which she replies, “Soap and water.” As she tells *Fortune*, “Those are not my occupations. The fact that I don’t worry is more important than the water. I really have accepted what I can do and can’t do.”

## **But really: What’s her secret?**

Her healthy lifestyle—including having never eaten [red meat](#) and still [walking](#) a mile a day even after twice breaking a hip (she now uses a wheeled walker)—has certainly been a contributing factor to her longevity. But Deborah knows it’s not everything: Her father lived to 81, but her mother died of cancer in her 60s. Edmond died in his ’70s (after they had separated), albeit due to his refusal to have surgery on an umbilical hernia. “He died from a strangulated hernia, as soon as he went to the hospital,” she says. She’s outlived her brother. And then there was the greatest loss of her life: the death of her son (which she declines to go into detail about).

But when it comes to having outlasted so many people, Deborah says, “I don’t think about it. You just accept.”

She tends to have much younger friends, which helps. “I’ve always had friends that are younger—because of the conversation, the theater, the plays we go to see, the activities we do, you know? They’re in their 40s,” she says. “It’s fun.”

Her advice to others seeking longevity is to keep both body and mind active—and to read a lot, as she does, favoring ninth-century Japanese mysteries. “I like Buddhism,” she says. “I call myself a Jewish Zen Buddhist.”

But an active mind, for Deborah, does not include rumination.

“The thing is I do not allow negative thoughts. We are in control. And we can say, ‘I don’t want to go there.’ You just don’t go. I don’t,” she says. “I mean, the world is a terrible place and there’s terrible things happening all the time ... But I’m trying to help as many people as I can to live healthier lives.”