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Approach to Diet, Exercise, Hospitality Shaped One Centenarian's Journey

RESORTS: Retirement Not Part of Deborah Szekely's Plan; Keeping Worry at Bay

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There is perhaps no greater proof of the benefits of exercising and eating right than the fact that Deborah Szekely turned 102 years old in May and is still going strong.

Szekely co-founded Rancho la Puerta with her late husband, Edmond, back in 1940.

Located in Mexico close to the border with San Diego, the world-renowned fitness resort and spa is considered one of the first wellness resorts in North America. It is why the Huffington Post once called Szekely the “godmother of the wellness movement.”

At 102 years old, Szekely — who, over the decades, has served as Rancho la Puerta's GM, activities director and head chef — has turned the reins of the resort over to its president (her daughter, Sarah Brightwood). However, Szekely still works there three days a week.

SDBJ: What are your responsibilities at the ranch these days?

Szekely: On Tuesdays, I meet with members of the staff, helping them understand the soul of the ranch. On Wednesdays, I give lectures. I speak about being active and happy, and I do everything I can to help simplify people's lives and make them livable. On Thursdays, I meet with presenters I want to get to know.

I literally do something almost every day. I get phone calls, I attend Rotary meetings. I also tour the country, speaking about wellness and what 100 looks like.

To what do you attribute your longevity?

To not worrying. I don't do anything I have to worry about. I only do things that I think I can do to help, where they wouldn't frustrate me. My daughter is the president and worries about the business and sees that we pay the taxes and all that stuff.

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I like people and I like speaking to them. I've done it so long, so it's easy. I really look forward to and enjoy Wednesday nights. I speak to all the guests and answer their questions. It's a Q&A and it keeps me challenged and I like that. I'm enjoying life and I'm enjoying being busy.

What's the best part about working at your age?

The best part is not acting my age. When I woke up, the morning I turned 100, I laid in bed and said to myself, "Deborah, you're 100." That was different. But I couldn't think of anything else that was different, so I just went on doing what I always did.

Is there a bad thing about working at your age?

I haven't found it yet.

Do you ever think you'll retire?

No. I mean, well, I'm alive, I'm not retired. And then when I die, then I'll retire.

What advice would you give to someone contemplating whether to continue working past retirement age if they didn't have to?

I would advise them to have something to retire to. The word "retire" comes from the French. It also means withdraw, withdraw to regroup, to return in a new life, in a new style. So it means you step back and you think. In battles they fought in the old days, they would go down to the bottom of the hill and regroup and then go back up the hill again.

When you go down the hill to regroup, decide what you're going to go back up to. If climbing the hill again is difficult, figure other ways to climb. There are always other ways, other routes, to keep on going.

SDBJ: Is there anything you would do differently if you had to do your career over again?

I'm very fluent in French. I think in French and I often dream in it. So I used to think that I might have picked Paris instead of San Diego, because there are so many places to travel to that are so different. All the countries of Europe are so close and so small and so accessible. In the United States, each state is the size of a country.

But I'm very happy with how everything turned out.

Deborah Szekely

AGE: 102

WORK HISTORY: Her work with Rancho la Puerta began in 1940

CURRENT OCCUPATION: Co-founder of Rancho la Puerta

NOTABLE: Szekely was born in Brooklyn and lived in a palm frond cottage with no running water or electricity on a beach in Tahiti from ages 8 to 13