

## THIS IS WHAT 100 LOOKS LIKE.



San Diego's own version of a "Blue Zone" centenarian celebrates her 102nd birthday this spring. Deborah Szekely — often referred to as the "Spokesperson of the Modern Fitness Movement" and founder of two of the world's best-known and highest-regarded spa/fitness resorts — beams with a lively energy and acumen usually reserved for highly successful people half her age.

If people want to know what 102 years of living a healthful, purposeful life can look like and *BE* like, they need look no further than Deborah Szekely. She embodies everything she has championed for over 84 years.

And what a life story hers has been. The Brooklyn-born daughter of immigrant parents, Deborah lived in a palm frond cottage without running water or electricity on a beach in Tahiti from ages 8 to 13. Her parents had left Brooklyn in search of a healthier lifestyle for the family. She tended fish traps in the lagoon, helped her mother grow vegetables in several dugout canoes, spoke French and some Polynesian, and prepared herself, unknowingly at the time, to be the co-founder in 1940 of an initially primitive "fitness camp" in Baja California, Mexico.

Yes, Rancho La Puerta, a now world-famous resort, started life as a tent camp without running water or electricity and "no money." But Deborah was prepared, thanks to her Tahiti experience.

At 18, with her husband Edmond Szekely, she welcomed the first guests and "ran the show" from Day One. Edmond was the draw in the first few decades: he was renowned for his research and theories of achieving lifelong vitality. He lectured and counseled guests daily.

Eventually, Deborah took over all aspects of Rancho La Puerta's operations, walking as many as 10 miles a day overseeing every detail on the property as it grew from a small cluster of adobe huts to over 80 private casitas, a dozen gyms, four pools, and other facilities. Today, the resort stands on the same site as it was founded in a mountain valley east of San Diego, but it has grown to 4,000 acres. Its initial precepts of mind/body/spirit fitness remain the same, but now with a luxury, world-class resort style.

The very history of the modern-day fitness movement — hiking, aerobics, the introduction of yoga to North America, organic meals, etc. — is alive and well in Deborah Szekely.



Eighteen years after Rancho La Puerta's opening, Deborah founded the Golden Door Spa on her own in 1958. Without exaggeration, nearly every female star of stage and screen called the Golden Door home in the '60s and '70s when preparing for their next role. Deborah sold the property in 1998, and while the spa is not as oriented to Hollywood today, per se, it continues to welcome guests from around the world to what is often called "the number one destination spa."

With business success came the desire to serve the community as well as the nation. Deborah's "other careers" are extraordinary. She was President of the Inter-American Foundation from 1984-1990, overseeing a Washington, D.C., staff that awarded grants to micro-capitalism startups in Latin America and the Caribbean. She founded Eureka Communities in 1991: a mentoring program for the heads of small, inner city, non-profit social service agencies in the U.S. Her New Americans Museum in San Diego is now in its 23rd year of featuring the positive contributions to the U.S. by immigrants. She funded Setting Course — A Congressional Management Guide for first-time elected members of Congress, with the 17<sup>th</sup> edition now in print for 60 new members of the 117th Congress.

She's been a U.S. delegate to UNESCO and a member of many commissions, including the President's Council on Sports, Fitness, and Nutrition, recipient of the Order of the Aztec Eagle, Mexico's most-prestigious award to a non-Mexican citizen, a Doctor of Humane Letters at San Diego State University, and much more.

Today, Deborah continues to meet with guests at Rancho La Puerta for her popular Wednesday night question-and-answer session —always a full house. At every opportunity, she continues to spread the word about the benefits of living a physically vigorous, involved, and "re-invented" life. She champions efforts toward healthier foods, especially in the meals of schoolchildren, social justice, and volunteerism close to home. Her home on a San Diego canyon near the heart of the city is always abuzz with friends, community leaders, and colleagues.

Life is good at 102! Yours can be, too. Anyone can learn the wisdom of the ageless from those rare centenarians like Deborah Szekely, who believe that age is nothing more than a number.