



Volunteers with the Blue Zones Project of Southwest Florida help clean up the Naples Zoo after Hurricane Irma hit Sept. 10. SUBMITTED: BLUE ZONES STAFF

BACK TO NORMAL

BLUE ZONES CHIPS IN POST-IRMA

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Hurricane Irma left a silver lining: a surge of volunteerism that could have a lasting imprint, according to the Blue Zones Project in Southwest Florida.

Countless individuals responded to the call of charities to make donations or to give their time and muscle to churches and volunteer groups to help get water, food and other essentials to hard-hit areas such as Everglades City and Immokalee. The community goodwill spread from East Naples to Bonita Springs.

One of the signature components of the health and well-being initiative with the Blue Zones Project involves identifying one's purpose in life. Irma may help people find their purpose because it forced them to realize what's important in their lives, Lisa Gruenloh, a consultant and coach for the Blue Zones, said.

On a simple level, homeowners who were evacuating ahead of the storm had to make choices of what's of value to them to load up into their vehicles, with the mindset they may return to widespread losses, she said.

From a broader perspective, "life triggering" events, like a divorce, often force people in new directions, she said. The hurricane could have the same impact, where people who may not have volunteered before Irma but who stepped forward afterward may stick with volunteering long term, she said.

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"I think it depends on the person," she said. "It feels good; even just witnessing an act of kindness makes us feel good."

The Blue Zones Project, launched in Southwest Florida in 2015 to help the populace pursue better health and lifestyle habits, is hosting a program called "Revitalize," this month. The goal is to help people regain a sense of normalcy after Irma. The program will focus on five broad categories of well-being. Those are one's social, physical and financial well-being and their sense of community and purpose. Gruenloh will be a panelist at the program.

"People who have a sense of purpose in life naturally want to serve others," she said. "People who have a strong

sense of purpose are clear in their values."

Local leaders and volunteers with the Blue Zones project helped set an example of volunteerism after Irma, working alongside other volunteers from companies and retirees to help get the Naples Zoo cleaned up and ready for re-opening Saturday.

In addition, there were 11 volunteers from zoos across the Midwest who helped, along with others who are friends of the zoo and year-round volunteers, according to Naples Zoo officials.

Grassroots volunteerism and organized events by churches and charities were critical to many hard-hit areas like Everglades City and Immokalee, and mobile home parks, she said.

"I have never seen so many people volunteer in Everglades City," Gruenloh, who is active with Drug Free Collier, said. "It was heart warming."

Meals of Hope, a local food-packaging charity in Southwest Florida, part-

nered with nearly three dozen social service agencies, churches, schools and other groups to get crucial supplies to storm victims across the region, Katie Schweikhardt, chief operating officer for Meals, said.

About 850,000 pounds of needed items have been distributed locally since Irma, and the group's warehouse has served at least 200 families, she said.

Before Irma hit home, the charity had sent 500,000 meals to Texas after Hurricane Harvey struck the Texas coast. Now, Meals is mobilizing to send 155,000 pounds of food to Puerto Rico, she said.

Meals has a loyal base of individuals and organizations that religiously pack the food for its massive distribution campaign.

Some examples of other ways people helped out after Irma include football players from Immokalee High School who helped with First Baptist Church

in Immokalee to load relief supplies for local residents. Football players from Golden Gate High School did relief assistance with Living Waters Church in Estero.

The principal of North Naples Middle School posted a notice on Facebook asking for volunteers to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and to donate other supplies. Within hours, more than 200 volunteers descended on the school to help, and the relief program continued a second day.

The Blue Zones "Revitalize" program will be held Oct. 18 at 5:30 p.m. at the NCH North Naples Hospital boardroom at Brookdale, 11190 Health Park Blvd. To reserve a seat to the free program, sign up at <https://revitalize18.eventbrite.com>

The program will be repeated 5:30 p.m. Oct. 24 at the Bonita Springs Area Chamber of Commerce, 25071 Chamber of Commerce Drive. To sign up, go to <https://revitalize24.eventbrite.com>.