

BLUE TIP: “The true keys to happiness lie in changing the way we think and behave, seeking out experiences such as savoring a beautiful moment and taking a picture of it, thanking a friend, writing a gratitude journal, or performing random acts of kindness.”

— Dan Buettner, *Thrive: Finding Happiness the Blue Zones Way*



Blue Zones Project staff and volunteers work in Immokalee after Hurricane Irma to help local residents with food, water, and other supplies. BLUE ZONES PROJECT OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

THREE FROM NEW JERSEY WORK FOUR DAYS IN SWFL

The Rotary Club of Mullica Hill, New Jersey, had no ties to Immokalee until Hurricane Irma pummeled the migrant farmworkers' community.

Three volunteers with the Rotary club in the New Jersey community about 45 minutes from Atlantic City recently returned to their home after spending four days in Southwest Florida to help Immokalee residents start to put their lives together. Hurricane Irma tore through aging mobile homes and other residences in Immokalee, placing farmworker families and children in perilous living conditions.

The New Jersey group worked alongside the Rotary Club of Immokalee, staff members of The Blue Zones Project of Southwest Florida, and local businesses to help place blue tarps on damaged roofs in Immokalee and make some basic repairs so families could get by.

The Blue Zones is a wellness and longevity initiative underway in the region where businesses, government agencies, restaurants, grocery stores, churches, residential communities and other groups incorporate healthier options in daily practices so its audience base can make better choices. Part of the Blue Zones' way is to connect

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with others, to volunteer and enrich one's life and find purpose.

"It was extremely gratifying to make a small difference in a couple of peoples' lives," Bud Verfaillie, with the Rotary in Mullica Hill who organized the effort, said.

He connected with Sandra Hempstead, governor elect of the District 6960 office for the Rotary of Southwest Florida, to learn of the need in Immokalee.

"It's almost indescribable the conditions they are living in after (Irma)," Verfaillie said. "It was really heartfelt what those folks are going through."

Dorin Oxender, assistant governor elect with District 6960 and director of i-Tech, the technical college in Immokalee, said Verfaillie and his two volunteers from New Jersey worked at least four long days with the local Rotary members and Blue Zones staff members in Immokalee, making basic repairs and putting down tarps on 20 damaged roofs.

"He came down with a ton of energy," Oxender said. "They stayed about



Rotary Club members from Mullica Hill, New Jersey, team up with Rotary Club in Immokalee for Hurricane Irma relief in Immokalee. BLUE ZONES PROJECT OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

four days and we worked every day sun up to sun down."

The local Rotary club connected with Crisis CleanUp, an "open source application" online that connects disaster recovery organizations with people who need help. The local Rotary also worked with Team Rubicon to get training, Oxender said. Team Rubicon is a national organization that connects military veterans with first responders to deploy teams in disaster areas.

Verfaillie said his original plan was to deliver generators to nursing homes in Central Florida and the plans changed when he learned from Hemp-

stead how badly Southwest Florida got hit by the Category 4 storm on Sept. 10.

"We raised about \$15,000 in individual and company donations and bought supplies," he said, which included baby formula, 60 pairs of sneakers for kids, pre-packaged food and 150 tarps, along with tools. A truck was donated for the trip to bring the supplies.

Two days after Irma hit, Verfaillie, 61, and two friends, both 65, who have residences in Marco Island where they could stay, hit the road bound for Florida. The trip took 29 hours due to a few snags along with way unrelated to Irma, he said.

"It was different from what I have ever seen before, and in the areas which got hit hard, you could just see (the pain) in their eyes," Verfaillie said.

The Blue Zones project was introduced to Southwest Florida in 2015 based on the world travels of Dan Buettner, who identified communities worldwide where people share lifestyle traits and live to 100 or older. He wrote a New York Times best-seller about the nine principles of longevity.

The "Power Nine" include moving naturally by being physically active, eating a plant-slant diet, knowing your purpose in life, taking time to relax, having a healthy social network and putting loved ones first. A popular activity is to form walking groups, or walking moais, to use Blue Zones terminology.

The philosophy is that over time, healthier choices will become the easier choice, and each incremental step can improve health and well-being. Offering fresh fruit and bottled water instead of soft drinks and candy bars in employee breakrooms is one example.

Southwest Florida is one of 37 communities nationwide that is either working toward recognition as a Blue Zones community or has achieved it by widespread adoption of the underlying principles.