



W H Y I S

# THE REAL

By Artis Henderson







N A P L E S S O

THEY?



Each morning Tom Anstead wakes up in the Naples home he shares with his two daughters eager for the day.

He has a job at one of the largest employers in Southwest Florida, and he makes a good salary and has outstanding benefits. His social life is filled with friends and neighbors, many of them parents at his daughters' school who have similar values and goals as his own. When it comes to personal fitness, he's a triathlete who swims, bikes and runs regularly.

"I can say this pretty honestly," Anstead, 47, says, "I'm healthier than I've ever been in my life since I moved to Naples."

And that's not all. Anstead lists Naples' other exceptional qualities:

"Naples is an extremely safe place, the safest place I've ever lived. And it's spotless. People are proud of the beaches and the fishing and the weather. Visitors talk about Naples like it's the greatest place on earth, and they're right. Naples is paradise."

As it turns out, Anstead isn't the only one who feels great about living in Naples. For four years in a row, the metropolitan area of Naples, Immokalee and Marco Island ranked number one in the Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index. It's the first time in the Well-Being Index's 11 years of data collection that the same community has achieved the top-ranked position over four consecutive years.

In the most recent index report, Naples scored among the top two communities across four of the five well-being categories: purpose (do people like what they do and are they motivated to achieve their goals?), social (are there supportive relationships and love?), financial (is a person's economic life stable and secure?) and community (do people feel safe and do they have pride in where they live?). Though it did not score highest in the physical well-being category this year, it

has in previous years.

We took a look at some of the factors that contribute to our area's runaway well-being success.

For starters, it has to do with the population itself. Researchers at Gallup point out that Naples may achieve such high scores on the well-being index because residents are naturally inclined toward well-being.

"Older Americans—who make up a larger percentage of the population in Naples than what is found nationally—have widely better well-being than their younger counterparts," says Dan Witters, research director of the Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index, in a report published on the Gallup website.

There's also the matter of affluence. Naples has the second highest percentage of millionaires in the nation, and five of the world's billionaires call it home. There's a reason *Forbes* named Naples to its list of *Top 25 Places to Retire Rich*. And being rich often equals better health. Studies routinely show that health and well-being are directly connected to wealth, and that a higher income equals a lower likelihood of disease and premature death.

"Middle-class Americans are healthier than those living in or near poverty, but they are less healthy than the upper class," says a report from the Urban Institute which cites research from the National Center for Health Statistics, the *American Journal of Public Health* and the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, among others.



## LOCAL BLUE ZONES-APPROVED RESTAURANTS

The Blue Zones Project has made huge strides in improving the quality of life across the United States in just the last few years. Luckily for us, Southwest Florida is one of their nine project site locations across the country, so many local organizations have partnered with them in a commitment to strive for healthier living.

A good chunk of these organizations happen to be restaurants, which means nutritious dishes are never far out of reach. Next time you're trying to figure out where to go for dinner—or even for just a treat—consider one of these Blue Zones Project-approved restaurants:

—Tess Raines



NAPLES SCORED AMONG

THE TOP TWO COMMUNITIES

ACROSS FOUR OF THE FIVE

WELL-BEING CATEGORIES...



#### COLLIER COUNTY

BRK Pizza  
Baleen—LaPlaya Beach  
Resort  
C.J's on the Bay  
Coast—Edgewater Beach  
Hotel  
Cosmo's Café and Pizzeria  
Jason's Deli  
Juicelation  
Mel's Diner  
Naples Flatbread, Mercato  
Organically Twisted  
Riverwalk at Tin City  
Shula's Steak House  
Skillets (all locations)  
The Boathouse on Naples  
Bay  
The Bowl/The Bowl Central  
The Café  
The Dock at Crayton Cove  
The Local  
The Wave Café, NCH North  
Hospital  
Tree Top Café, NCH Baker  
Downtown Hospital  
True Food Kitchen

#### LEE COUNTY

Kava Culture Kava Bar  
Naples Flatbread, Miromar  
Outlets  
Old 41 Restaurant  
Palladio Trattoria  
Survey Café  
Skillets (all locations)  
The Boardwalk at FGCU



## JUST WHAT IS THE BLUE ZONES PROJECT?

It's inspired by the study performed by Dan Buettner, a fellow at *National Geographic*, who set out to discover the secrets behind the longest-lived communities in the world. Buettner and his team of researchers examined five geographic regions which had populations with the highest life expectancy or with the highest proportions of people who reached 100—Okinawa, Japan; Loma Linda, California; Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica; Ikaria, Greece; and the Italian island of Sardinia. His team discovered nine important commonalities.

health, just as sunshine in moderate doses is essential for vitamin D.

But wealth and the seaside life aren't enough to explain Naples' repeated high scores on the well-being index. Especially if you take into account that as recently as 2011, Naples ranked only 73rd on the list of 190 communities surveyed.

What else could account for this rise in the ranks and a steady position at the top? The launch of the Southwest Florida Blue Zones Project, which began in the area in 2015. Even the folks at Gallup have given credit to the Blue Zones Project, with Witters noting in



his report, "At least some of the improvement seen in recent years may have been driven by the Blue Zones Project in the Naples area."

One of the ways the Southwest Florida Blue Zones Project is helping to boost the well-being of our community is by sharing Buettner's findings and encouraging residents to implement some of these nine commonalities in their own lives. In *Live Longer*,

### **They move naturally.**

People in the world's longest-lived communities do things like garden and perform daily chores without mechanical conveniences. They stay fit but don't use gyms or training regimens.



### **They have a sense of purpose.**

Ask the world's longest-living people why they get up in the morning, and they'll be able to give you a clear answer.

### **They know how to relieve stress.**

Stress contributes to chronic inflammation, which is at the root of major age-related diseases. Different communities have different techniques—praying, napping, happy hour—but they all know how to let go.

### **They don't overindulge.**

People in Blue Zones often go by the 80 percent rule, meaning they only eat until they're 80 percent full. And they don't eat heavy meals late in the day.

### **They cut down on their meat consumption.**

Long-living folks have a diet built around legumes, and they only eat meat, on average, five times a month.

### **They have a few drinks.**

Except for the Seventh Day Adventists of Loma Linda, the communities in the studies all had a drink or two a day, either with meals or with friends.



### **They had faith.**

An overwhelming number of the centenarians interviewed as part of the research belonged to a faith-based community. The actual denomination of the faith didn't matter.

### **They valued those closest to them.**

Study participants in the Blue Zones kept parents and grandparents close (often in the same home), they committed to a life partner and they dedicated time and love to their children.

### **They surrounded themselves with healthy people.**

Well-being is contagious, studies show, and long-lived people are in social groups who practice healthy behaviors.





*Better* presentations held each month at various venues across Southwest Florida, Blue Zones Project presenters offer suggestions and best practices.

“Everyone has heard that we should eat better and exercise more,” explains Deb Logan, executive director of the Southwest Florida Blue Zones Project, “but these nine principles are inclusive of all aspects of well-being.”

For example, under the commonality “move naturally,” the tip sheet includes a note about adopting a dog.

“Research tells us people who own dogs tend to walk more than people who don’t,” Logan says, “and they tend to connect with their neighbors more.”

Connection is an important part of the Blue Zones Project’s mission, and to that end the group facilitates activities that build community, like the weekly walking moais where five to eight people meet to walk in their communities. The term moai, pronounced mo-eye, comes from Okinawa, Japan, and translates to “meeting for a common pur-

pose.” In Southwest Florida, the Blue Zones Project has walking moais, restaurant moais and potluck moais.

“People get together under the auspices of a walking group or dinner, and they get to know each other and they build relationships,” says Logan. “Having people in our lives who support us is important.”

Another way the Blue Zones Project is changing Southwest Florida for the better is by building infrastructure at the places people get “stuck,” like after-church donuts or football concession stands that only sell hot-dogs and nachos or vending machines with no healthy choices. The standard selection isn’t taken away, but healthy options can be added.

“Our goal is to make healthy choices easier,” says Logan. “We know that we need to change the culture and environment in which we live—where we learn, where we work, where we eat, where we pray—in order to re-align our daily choices. At those places, we give organizations a checklist of options that helps make healthy choices easier,” she says. “We don’t teach yoga or give fitness or nutrition classes—that great work is already going on in the community—we help organizations implement best practices.”

Some examples of those best practices? Adding plant-based options to restaurant menus, hanging signs in grocery stores that

encourage drinking more water, and offering healthy snacks alongside the traditional donuts and coffee.

The Southwest Florida Blue Zones Project is sponsored by the NCH Healthcare System, and currently almost 600 local organizations have either implemented the Blues Zones Project best practices or are on their way.

“We’re spending way too much on health-care in this country compared to other developed countries,” says Logan. “If we can keep people out of the hospital for chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, then everybody wins.”

This community-wide investment in health and well-being, she says, is perhaps the truest answer behind the question, why is Naples so healthy? And Logan emphasizes that the Blue Zones Project is a “we” project—when well-being goes up overall, it’s because a number of organizations and individuals are collaborating to make it happen.

“This is an amazing community. For a project like Blue Zones to work, there has to be people who would fund it, and we have to see that community leaders are really invested, that the superintendent of schools is on board, the sheriff is on board, the United Way is on board, that big businesses, health-care and public health will support it,” Logan explains. “When you see a commitment to well-being like that, you know that it’s a great community. Blue Zones Project gives us a common mission. We’re all trying to help people live longer, healthier, happier lives.”

If the last four years of data are any indication, that mission has been a success. ■

