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DIVING INTO THE BLUE ZONES LIFESTYLE
HELPS NAPLES STAY NO. 1 NATIONWIDE
IN HEALTH, HAPPINESS, AND LONGEVITY

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BLUE

78 NAPLES ILLUSTRATED

For an unprecedented third year in a row, the Naples metropolitan area ranked No. 1 in the United States for well-being. Naples residents responding to a national poll said they're happier, healthier, and more socially connected—all factors found in communities with exceptional longevity.

Since 2008, the Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index has examined the quality of life across five elements: sense of purpose, social relationships, financial security, relationship to the community, and physical health. While Naples' superb climate and natural beauty surely contribute to happiness, the poll's results indicate a larger trend bubbling below the surface. Dig deeper and it becomes evident that this region's top-ranked wellness is not just a feeling but a lifestyle, one intricately tied to the Blue Zones Project.

"I think the biggest influence has been the Blue Zones Project and excellent health locally," says Dr. Allen Weiss, president and CEO of NCH Healthcare System, which operates two hospitals in Naples and outpatient facilities from Bonita Springs to Marco Island. "We were ranked seventy-third seven years ago and are now first for three consecutive years. We live six years longer than the average American."



Weiss is unapologetic in his push to use the community's health-care resources for prevention more than repair. In fact, he was instrumental in bringing the Blue Zones Project to Naples in 2014. NCH underwrites this community-wide initiative, which aims to improve well-being by making healthy choices easier to follow. The project touches upon every element of a community—from the workplace to schools, restaurants, and grocery stores. But it also prioritizes self-care and societal involvement with the idea that engaged and productive residents make well-being a priority for themselves and their neighbors.

In his role at NCH, Weiss has seen these concepts yield positive results. After three NCH nurses were diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer, the hospital changed some of its health insurance options and added wellness programs, cooking classes, and specialized workshops for employees. These efforts not only provided those working at NCH with convenient avenues to adopt healthier habits, but they also lowered the hospital's health-care costs. If this was achievable within the NCH system, what could such a program mean for the entire community? This thought led Weiss to discover the work of Dan Buettner and the Blue Zones Project.

"I searched nationally for effective and proven programs with real metrics and came up with the Blue Zones folks," says Weiss, who personally traveled to some of the U.S. locations where the earliest Blue Zones Projects took place.

Buettner is an explorer and author whose 20-plus years of research on longevity and the communities that nurture it debuted in a *National Geographic* cover story entitled "The Secrets of Long Life" in November 2005. The edition became one of the best-selling issues in the magazine's history.

As he further explored this subject, Buettner identified five Blue Zones, regions around the world with the highest life expectancy or proportions of centenarians. He published these findings in his 2008 book, *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest*, which became a *New York Times* best seller. He followed it in 2010 with the release of *Thrive: Finding Happiness the Blue Zones Way*, in 2015 with *The Blue Zones Solution: Eating and Living Like the World's Healthiest People*, and in 2017 with *The Blue Zones of Happiness: Lessons from the World's Happiest People*.



Buettner coined the term Blue Zones for the blue circles he marked on the map as he identified communities with extraordinary longevity. He circled Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula; the Greek island of Ikaria; and the Seventh-day Adventist community of Loma Linda, California.

"Coincidentally, those also are among the happiest places on Earth," Buettner says. "It's not because they try to live a long time, but they are living in a place where the healthy choice is unavoidable." As Buettner explains, living healthy doesn't automatically guarantee happiness, but living unhealthy almost guarantees unhappiness. "It's very hard to be happy when you're unhealthy."

Buettner's research showed similar lifestyle choices among each of these communities, a set of characteristics he later dubbed the Power Nine principles. They center on moving naturally as part of daily life, eating wisely, knowing your life's purpose, and belonging to a social community. The Blue Zones Project leverages these ideas into active concepts to improve the areas in which we live, work, learn, and play. The thinking is that if our environment directly influences our choices, then we have to make healthy options intrinsic to our environment.

"When it comes to longevity and happiness, it's got to

be something people do for a lifetime," Buettner says. "We stay very focused not on changing behavior but on optimizing the environment. We don't tell city governments what [projects] to choose. We don't tell schools what to teach. We offer Blue Zone certification with choices that have helped other people improve health."

Since the Blue Zones Project launched in Collier County, nearly 200 businesses and organizations—including restaurants, grocery stores, schools, worksites, and faith-based institutes—have become Blue Zone certified. Residents and visitors can see Blue Zone ideals in effect throughout the community. The Naples Walking Club, for example, is less interested in race-walking and more concerned with promoting consistency and building deeper friendships. Collier County students have more fruits and vegetables to choose from in the cafeteria, and many classrooms incorporate the school garden into lessons.

Diet plays a large part in longevity. Of the Power Nine principles, three revolve around food. The 80 percent rule advises diners to finish eating when their stomachs are 80 percent full. Buettner also encourages a primarily plant-based diet as well as the habit of consuming alcohol in moderation; he advises a glass or two of wine—preferably Sardinian Cannonau—a day.



IN HIS LATEST BOOK, RESEARCHER DAN BUETTNER SHARES INSPIRATIONAL TALES ABOUT LIVING TO 100.



"Most of what we think makes people get happier is misguided," he says. "People who eat a plant-based diet run about a third the rate of the average population for getting heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers. If I get my communities to eat a plant-based diet, I can reduce those diseases."

Locally, restaurants throughout the Paradise Coast have reset their menus to feature healthy options and are implementing small changes that make a big difference, such as not automatically refilling glasses of soda or serving bread and butter with dinner. In addition, several Blue Zone-certified eateries are offering an alternative to large, rich desserts by selling "nice bites," smaller, limited-calorie delicacies like a 150-calorie brownie.

Feeling a sense of belonging and engaging in supportive relationships is another tenant of the Blue Zones Project. This notion comes from Buettner's study of people in Okinawa and the tradition of *moais*, social support groups that start in childhood and extend throughout a person's life.

"We know that isolation kills," Buettner explains. "If you were lucky enough to be born in Okinawa, you were born into a system where you automatically have a half-dozen people with [whom] you travel through life. They call it a *moai*."

The Blue Zones Project takes this concept and uses it to help people connect. "It's not just hurtling people together," Buettner says. "It's important to put people together who share values and interests because then they're likely to become friends and are going to support each other."

Naples real estate agent Gail Risner has applied this idea to her own life. Following the death of her boyfriend five years ago, Risner joined the Naples Walking Club as a social outlet. But it's become so much more for her.

5 KEY ELEMENTS OF WELL-BEING

1

PURPOSE: LIKING WHAT YOU DO EACH DAY AND BEING MOTIVATED TO ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS.

2

SOCIAL: HAVING SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND LOVE IN YOUR LIFE.

3

FINANCIAL: MANAGING YOUR ECONOMIC LIFE TO REDUCE STRESS AND INCREASE SECURITY.

4

COMMUNITY: LIKING WHERE YOU LIVE, FEELING SAFE, AND HAVING PRIDE IN YOUR COMMUNITY.

5

PHYSICAL: HAVING GOOD HEALTH AND ENOUGH ENERGY TO GET THINGS DONE DAILY.

"We are definitely doing something the Blue Zones promotes," Risner says. "We walk four times a week at 7 a.m. We walk about four miles in an hour, and while we're walking, of course, we're talking."

On any given day, as many as 22 people—ranging in age from their 50s to their 80s—walk a route from Tin City to the end of the City Dock, through Thirty-fourth Street and over to the pier. They complete the outing with breakfast, often at Joe's Diner where the owner always accommodates the group, no matter how large.

"We've just gotten to be best friends," Risner says. "Once we started getting involved in the Blue Zones, we started calling ourselves *moai*, and it was interesting how much stronger a group it made us. We all really support each other. We do activities outside the walk. It's really enriched all of our lives."

Last year, Risner attended Buettner's Purpose Workshop, which is designed to help people identify their purpose with the goal of living longer, happier, and more productive lives. Risner, who now serves as president of the Naples Walking Club, believes hers will be sharing the Blue Zone principles.

"I feel very passionate about the whole concept," she says. "I want to expose more people to this because it's been so helpful to me."

With Naples already the highest-ranking metropolitan area on the well-being scale, what's left for the Blue Zones Project to accomplish?

"We're four years into an eight-year program," Buettner says. "We seem to post gains every single year. But America's not a particularly happy place or a particularly healthy place. Although you're No. 1 in America, maybe you're No. 20 in the world. I'd like to see Naples take a run at becoming one of the healthiest places in the world." <<