

THE *e*Bella *e*Xtra

ENGAGING IN ISSUES BETWEEN THE ISSUES

Rooted in Resilience

Blue Zones Project promotes living healthier, happier lives

by Sebastien Saitta

With so much coming at us at once — hurricanes, a global pandemic, raging fires out West, rising chronic disease rates and bitter political tensions and division — improving well-being and building resilience is more important than ever.

What can Sierra redwood trees teach us about resilience? Redwoods are among the tallest and oldest living things in existence, with the average age of mature trees ranging from 800 to 1,500 years, and some reaching the age of 2,000. Having withstood drought, high winds, floods, fires, disease and bitter cold, these giant trees embody the spirit of resilience.

What many do not see is what happens just 5 to 6 feet beneath the surface. The trees' roots extend, sometimes up to 100 feet, and are often intertwined. In fact, these trees are codependent, relying on each other to survive. They form communities in which their roots fuse together, providing strength, support and nourishment for each other.

It is with this concept that Blue Zones Project, through the generous support and visionary leadership of NCH Healthcare System, helps to build resilience and optimize well-being in Southwest Florida in a time when we need it most.

"This is a 'we' project, meaning that we are helping people live longer, healthier, happier lives together," says Deb Logan, executive director at Blue Zones Project. "The roots of our 'we' include the many individuals, organizations and leaders that fall under that collective mission."

Blue Zones Project is working with more than 700 organizations — schools, restaurants, worksites, homeowners' associations and faith-based organizations — and has engaged with more than 225,000 individuals to bring healthier choices to Southwest Florida.

"This pandemic has exposed gaps in our community that include food insecurity, loneliness and financial hardship for so many," Logan says. "We have taken active steps to address these issues through a coordinated effort with our many partners, well-being champions and organizations."



Some of the well-being and resilience measures Blue Zones Project has implemented this year include:

- Creating a Food Policy Council to address food insecurity in Southwest Florida. This council involves more than 60 partners and advocates who operate within the local food system, from food pantries and local farms to Lee and Collier school districts and restaurants. The council is working to empower both organizations and individuals to improve health and fight disease through nutritionally sound practices supported through economically prudent policy, systems and environmental improvements.
- Participating with community partners in Immokalee, including Meals of Hope, Brighter Bites SWFL, Harry Chapin Food Bank and Reach Assembly FKA First Assembly of God, to help the underserved and food insecure through assistance at local food pantries.
- Hosting a series of online well-being group meetups to help combat the issue of loneliness, and foster connection, support and belonging. (Learn more at www.WellbeingMoai.Eventbrite.com.)
- Partnering with a financial advisory company to create a free financial well-being webinar series for those struggling with the financial fallout from COVID-19.
- Creating an ongoing series of well-being activities that are free online for the community. The series includes healthy cooking demonstrations, purpose workshops, fitness series and tai chi and yoga videos. (To sign up, visit www.BlueZonesProjectSWFL.Eventbrite.com.)

"Like any storm, vulnerabilities that existed beneath the surface are revealed," Logan says. "But our mission is to also show on a deeper level, the network of intertwined roots that have supported this community through tough times before and will see us through this pandemic and trying times in the future."