

**“Blue Zones Project promotes so many things that could actually make your life better. The more you know about it, the better you live and feel.”**  
 —Franck LeGrand, LeGrand’s Caribbean Market, Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida



## After Losing 100+ Pounds, Grocery Store Owner Promotes Healthier Options

By Lisa Monroe

Immokalee is an area where healthy food options are limited — sometimes called a [food desert or food swamp](#)— in [Collier County, Florida](#). [LeGrand Caribbean Market](#) is an oasis in that desert, at least for the large migrant population that shops there. They are people who work long hours, live in shared housing without their own kitchens, and speak as many as nine different languages — including Spanish and Haitian Creole. Franck LeGrand Jr. speaks all of them.

LeGrand runs the food market that his late father ran before him, in part because he knows the community relies on it and also because he wants to continue his father’s legacy. Franck’s dad was a migrant worker once himself. Franck LeGrand Sr. immigrated to the U.S. from Haiti when Franck was a boy and worked in the fields for 20 years until he saved enough money to start his own business. Franck remembers getting up in the wee hours of the morning as a child to fill his dad’s cooler with ice for the day and occasionally going into the fields with him when he was young.

The migrant life is a hard life with many things to worry about so there isn’t a lot of time to stop to consider the best food options. That is a challenge Franck is chipping away at through his interactions with people in the community at his market. He’s even worked with [Blue Zones Project](#) to redesign his market to nudge his customers toward healthier food options. It’s complicated and a slow process, but Franck relishes every small victory, even if it’s just a worker grabbing a piece of fruit for a snack instead of a bag of chips or a bottle of water instead of a soda. Franck knows better than anyone that food choices are affected by so many aspects of life and that changing regular habits isn’t easy. But he also knows change is within reach when you start making small changes one at a time. “I just had to change the way I eat and exercise more,” he said.

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### Franck’s Path to Weight Gain & Weight Loss

Franck turned to food and began emotional eating out of grief. In 2011, his father was killed tragically in a car accident while running an errand for the store. About a year later, his wife and child died from childbirth-related complications.

Franck Jr. weighed about 250 pounds when his father died but began eating more and gaining weight, as he left his job and moved back home to help his family run the store. By 2016 when he visited his doctor, he weighed more than 300 pounds at age 37 and was told that he was cutting his life short unless he made some lifestyle changes.

This was enough to motivate LeGrand to make some changes, so he began learning more about diet and how to eat healthily. Within a year he’d lost 100 pounds and become an inspiration to the customers in his store and others who knew him.

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Through his brother-in-law James, Franck also became acquainted with Blue Zones Project in 2017 and it inspired him to learn more about how longevity can be impacted by diet and lifestyle changes.

In a 2020 interview with the News-Press, Franck was quoted as saying: “Blue Zones Project promotes so many things that could actually make your life better. The more you know about it, the better you live and feel.”

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The better Franck felt and looked, the more people were interested in his transformation and how he did it. In turn, that further inspired him to do more to make a positive impact on others. **That spurred him to partner with Blue Zones Project to redesign his market.**

### Partnering with Blue Zones

David Longfield-Smith is an organization lead for [Blue Zones Project in Southwest Florida](#) serving eight communities in Collier County, Bonita Springs, and Estero. The eight-year project began in 2014. Longfield-Smith’s role is to work with grocery stores and restaurants to help them incorporate healthier Blue Zones food options — more of the types of foods that the longest-lived populations in the world eat in Blue Zones. Plant-based foods are the staple in all of these areas of the world, with limited meat consumption and very little consumption of processed, prepackaged foods.

[Lifestyle and environment are also key factors related to longevity](#) based on Blue Zones research. In fact, they have been shown to have a bigger impact on longevity than any other factor including access to care and genetics. That’s why Blue Zones Project works with communities to help improve the built environment and nudge residents toward small incremental lifestyle changes that can make a big difference as a whole.

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“Immokalee is where most of the tomatoes in the United States come from in the winter,” Longfield-Smith explained. “It’s predominantly an agricultural community with about 40,000 people and a lot of migrant workers who come into the U.S. to pick crops. It’s a very poor area. When people think of Collier County, they usually think of Naples and Marco Island and these pristine beaches and the beautiful mansions, then you go out to Immokalee and you realize that it’s a unique community. **And in some ways, Immokalee has better community spirit and heart because the people there really connect and help one another.**”

[\[Related: These People Tried the Blue Zones Diet for Three Months—Watch What Happened\]](#)

There are only two larger grocery stores in Immokalee, neither of which has shown interest in working with Blue Zones Project so far. Longfield-Smith thought a better approach might be to work with smaller, community-based markets like LeGrand’s Caribbean, where many customers come on foot. “They might live in Immokalee, but they probably get on a bus early in the morning to ride for an hour and a half to a grove or farm to pick for the day, then have another long ride at the end of the day. Think about that during COVID times. You’ve got all these folks packed on a bus with no air conditioning riding to a field to pick crops. By the end of the day, they’re exhausted and hungry. It’s a challenge.”

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The neighborhood stores are where many people end up at the end of the long workday. “In Immokalee in the evening, you’ll see people on bicycles and walking, and they’re hitting these little neighborhood stores. **At Franck’s market, almost everybody walks from within a three or four-block radius.**” Because they have no cars, they can only carry limited supplies, so they visit the store often.

Longfield-Smith first met Franck while in the midst of his personal weight loss journey, but he actually became acquainted with Franck’s sister Francesca Sainvilus first. She and her husband James opened [Fify’s Caribbean Cuisine](#) and were in the process of bringing new dishes to the menu to become Blue Zones Project Approved™.

“James introduced me to Franck in 2017, and I learned his story. The first time we met I realized we had a connection and were kindred spirits because of his heart and his kindness. Since then, we’ve had this wild ride. We’ve been helping them both as the restaurant, which is now Blue Zones Project Approved and with the market.”

“The more I talked to Dave, the more I found out about Blue Zones Project and how it helps promote self-healing, and that the healthier you eat, the better you tend to live,” recalled LeGrand. “So, we started brainstorming on how to make that happen here and how to tell more people about a way to live better. We decided to start moving a few things around and the more we moved, the more we realized that we needed to make changes anyway.”

Hurricane Irma hit just as the market started making changes. LeGrand said, “We were in the middle of moving everything around when Irma hit, and then I had to fix the roof and replace the ceiling tiles. We realized we had a lot of old equipment in the back and decided to go ahead and replace it. And then we saw that the shelves were old and breaking apart at the seams. We ended up just shutting the store down for about six months to find new equipment that would work for us and help people make better choices when they walk in.”

“When I first saw the market, it was pretty old and really needed revamping. And then Hurricane Irma hit and caused damage. So, a massive overhaul was needed. We wanted to breathe new, healthier life into the market,” Longfield-Smith said.



LeGrand Caribbean Market before making interior changes.

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### Changes at the Market

Blue Zones Project helped redesign the layout and purchased new fixtures from surplus to better merchandise healthier food options to customers. Franck, Francesca, and sister Rosica all contributed. “I was so excited the day I went in and saw all their new shelves going in. They all had Star Wars on them, and I realized they had bought fixtures from a closed ToysRUs store. I thought it was great.”

By the end of the six months, the store had been totally overhauled. Two new registers were added, new shelving units replaced the old worn out ones, and new refrigerators and freezers were installed. “All in all, we pretty much redid everything,” LeGrand said.

One of the biggest changes that Longfield-Smith recommended was to move the store’s produce section from the back of the store to the front, and to make it larger. “I had told them, ‘If you put your fresh stuff at the back of the store, it’s more likely you’re going to be throwing a lot of it away. If you put it at the front of the store, people see it coming in and they see it at the register when they’re checking out so it’s more likely they will grab that avocado, tomato, or corn.’”

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LeGrand Caribbean Market after moving the produce department to the front of the store.

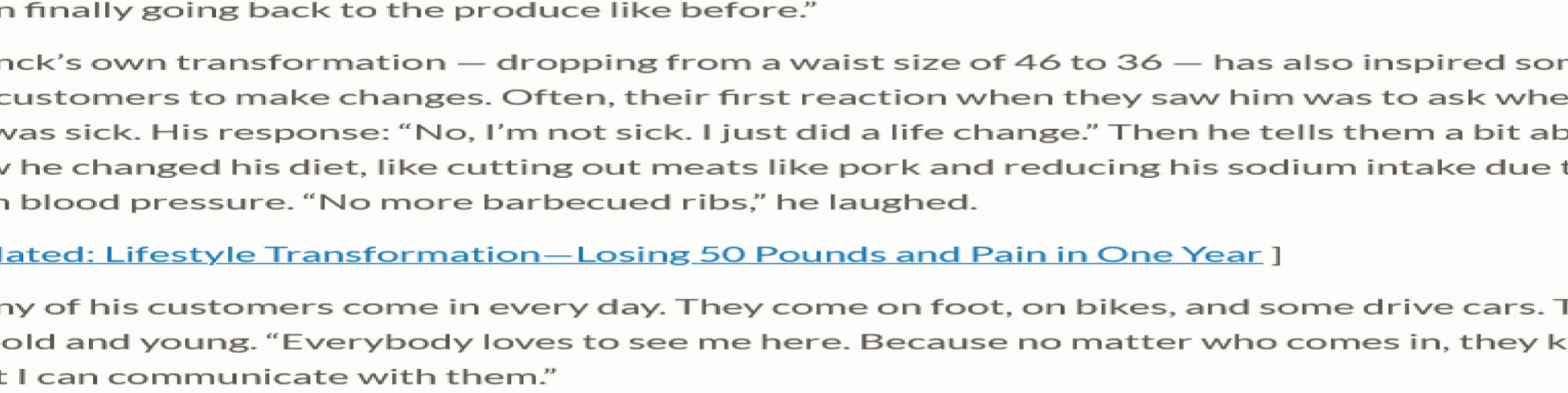
LeGrand followed that advice and moved the fresh fruits and vegetables to the front of the market, and expanded the display space from 12 feet to more than 30 feet. “Now, as soon as you walk in the store, these are the first things you see. Most people that come to the store try to do more grains, so we have beans, cornmeal, rice, plain things right there too.”

[Staple foods like beans and rice](#) are popular at the market. Not only are they inexpensive, but they have been proven to promote longevity in Blue Zones, proving that eating healthy doesn’t have to cost a fortune.

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Another important change at LeGrand’s Caribbean Market was the merchandising in the beverage coolers. “In the cooler doors, we put the water first and better beverages, then sodas, and finally at the end, we have beers.”

These may seem like small changes, but they do make a difference. “People are buying water a lot more than sodas now. It isn’t good for the soda company, but it makes me happy to see that people are actually doing this,” LeGrand said.



Rosica, Franck, and Franck’s late mother, Fify LeGrand

His customers are also buying a lot more produce. “When they walk in, they grab a basket and then they see what produce I have, instead of coming in and grabbing everything else first and then finally going back to the produce like before.”

Franck’s own transformation — dropping from a waist size of 46 to 36 — has also inspired some of his customers to make changes. Often, their first reaction when they saw him was to ask whether he was sick. His response: “No, I’m not sick. I just did a life change.” Then he tells them a bit about how he changed his diet, like cutting out meats like pork and reducing his sodium intake due to high blood pressure. “No more barbecued ribs,” he laughed.

[\[Related: Lifestyle Transformation—Losing 50 Pounds and Pain in One Year\]](#)

Many of his customers come in every day. They come on foot, on bikes, and some drive cars. They are old and young. “Everybody loves to see me here. Because no matter who comes in, they know that I can communicate with them.”

“Our customers are a mixture of people. Periodically I use four different languages in a day. We have the Latin community and the Haitian community, for instance. Where they live determines what they buy. We have a lot of people who come in and buy for the day. They’re buying food for this afternoon’s dinner and tomorrow’s lunch. A lot of our customers are migrants and they tend to live with multiple people in a house. It’s kind of like a college dorm with a common area with a stove. But in your room is where you keep all your food, and everybody has to buy their own food. You come out of your room to cook, but then you take your food back to your room.”

And while they may get a lot of physical exercise through their work to do, they don’t always make the right food choices. That’s why nudging them to make subtle diet changes is so important.

### Looking Ahead

In addition to working toward Blue Zones Project approval, LeGrand’s Caribbean Market is now just the third brick-and-mortar location in the state of Florida that’s been approved for the state-sponsored Fresh Access Bucks. The program matches dollar for dollar up to \$10 a day for money spent on groceries with additional dollars to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables.

The Fresh Access Bucks program is a statewide food program funded by the USDA that encourages low-income customers to buy more produce. “When people on food stamps come in and purchase meat and milk and other food that they need, Fresh Access Bucks gives them up to \$10 per purchase that they can put toward fruits and vegetables, to help them stretch their money.”

Blue Zones Project is pleased with the positive impact the small changes at LeGrand’s Caribbean Market has had on customers and their purchasing and eating habits. But Longfield-Smith is the first to admit that Blue Zones Project can’t take the credit for the changes LeGrand made in his own life or all the ways he and his family are impacting their community. Blue Zones Project was able to help the family to make an even bigger impact than they were already making on their own.

“Frank and that family are special period. Blue Zones Projects really only come to life in communities and with partners that demonstrate both willingness and capacity. Willingness is the heart and capacity includes the tools and the structure. The LeGrand family has both, and I see Blue Zones Project as being a force multiplier for them. We’re helping them to accomplish more.”

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Longfield-Smith would love to find other neighborhood markets and restaurants in Southwest Florida interested in doing more for their communities and partnering with Blue Zones Project.

Franck stays busy running his market and raising his two teenagers, Nikkora and Franck III. Franck’s mother [Rosica “Fify” LeGrand](#) passed away on November 3<sup>rd</sup> after a long battle with cancer. Community members remember her as a kind woman and lovingly called her the Community Godmother. Franck’s sister Rosica now runs the restaurant, Fify’s Caribbean Cuisine, while James and Francesca are now living in Hawaii where he’s serving as a Lieutenant in the U.S. Navy.



Lisa Oliver Monroe is a journalist and author of a travel book about America’s Historic Triangle (Williamsburg, Jamestown, and Yorktown). Her writing has been published by Virginia Living, Boomer Magazine, Kirkus Media, Advance for Nurses, and Colonial Williamsburg, among many others.

