

First community in Estero to earn Blue Zones designation

Andrea Stetson, Special to The News-Press Published 4:08 a.m. ET April 15, 2017 | Updated 60 minutes ago



(Photo: Andrea Stetson/Special to The News-Press)

Tidewater by Del Webb became the first community in Estero to have one of the newest and fastest growing labels when it was designated as a Blue Zones community. That means it met nine stringent criteria for healthy living.

Blue Zones has become a buzz word around the nation and has been introduced in communities and in schools in Collier County, but until recently it had not taken root farther north in Lee County. The Blue Zones Project looked at places around the world, such as Sardinia in Italy, Okinawa, Japan, and Loma Linda, Calif., where people were living longer and healthier lives and came up with ways to spread that knowledge.

"I reached out to Blue Zones as soon as I knew they were expanding to Estero," said Michelle Kithcart, lifestyle director. "From there, we hosted an informal seminar and then we started implementing. It is so simple. It is all the principles we already followed at Tidewater."

The nine principals include: move naturally, purpose, plant slant, 80 percent rule, wine and five, down shift, family first, right tribe and belong.

Kithcart said it was easy for Tidewater to secure the Blue Zones stamp of approval because the community already had many of the aspects in place. They had places to exercise, club activities and socialization. They added cooking classes and free seminars on healthy cooking.

"It is just simple changes," she said. "When we did coffee and conversation, it used to be coffee and donuts, so instead of donuts we are doing granola bars and fruit and juice. Same with our annual meetings instead of cookies, we did a breakfast with fruit."

Residents have embraced the Blue Zones lifestyle.

"I am more mindful about eating," said Ronna Sutow. "I am trying to get more movement and exercise in. Us over 50 types like to go out and eat a lot, and I am more mindful when I go out to eat, like having fish with no breading."

Sutow said she was familiar with the concept even before living in a Blue Zones community.

"I had read the book before I moved in," she said. "And at that time, Naples had been going on and on about how they were a Blue Zones community and it looked great and so when Michelle tried to go to Blue Zones, I was excited."

Sutow likes that the plan isn't just a diet, but an entire lifestyle.

"The more active you are, the more engaged with other people, the longer you live," she explained. "It is not just what you eat, but how you live your whole life. Most diet programs just focus on what you eat and this focuses on everything. To me the word diet becomes short term. This is how you can change your lifestyle. It is more all-encompassing. Plus, the whole community is involved and that makes it a lot easier."

Betty Young has helped her neighbors jump on board and embrace the program.

"I was pretty much doing things similar to Blue Zones as far as eating goes, but I have met some friends in here that I have encouraged to eat better and go to the gym," she explained. "Apparently my lifestyle is rubbing off on others."

Young said people are more likely to adhere to the diet and exercise when they do it together.

"I was just talking with Michelle one day and I was telling her how much fun it is to go to the gym with other ladies," she said. "I am sure it is kind of a domino effect. They see a friend exercising and losing weight and they want to do that. I see more and more people exercising, and when we have pot luck, we bring healthier things to eat. We pretty much do all nine things."

Tidewater is about to open its clubhouse and that new center will include places for residents to take a healthy cooking class. There will also be places for workshops on healthy living. Next to the clubhouse, there is a new community garden.

Kithcart also organized ways for residents to use their talents to hold workshops and share their specialties.

"Everyone has a background from somewhere, so I thought 'let's share our talents with each other instead of hiring instructors,'" she described. "They teach each other. It is really cool."

There have been classes in ballroom dancing, iPhone photography, travel, pickleball and bocce.

"I am making it easy for them," Kithcart said. "It is not a crazy fad diet. It is just simple lifestyle changes. It's so simple, but it makes such a big difference. Everyone should do it."

Del Edgar likes the new lifestyle that includes a yoga class that she enjoys. "It's terrific," she said. "It's life affirming."

"It will force us to think healthier," said Kris Sneed.

"It helps keep us healthy," added Joyce Rainwater. "It is a good way to meet people and focus on health together."

Tidewater is a 55 plus gated community in Estero, off Ben Hill Griffin Parkway, that has about 90 single-family homes and villas now and will have 385 at build out.



A new community center will have space for workshops on healthy living and will also have space for cooking classes. (Photo: Andrea Stetson/Special to The News-Press)



Del Edgar and Marsha Sherwood take a yoga class at Tidewater. (Photo: Andrea Stetson/Special to The News-Press)



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