

BLUE ZONES

“Moderation. Small helpings. Sample a little bit of everything.
These are the secrets of happiness and good health.” – Julia Child

Blue Zones Project brings well-being to HOA communities



Members at Twin Eagles organized a walking group around the golf course at their ribbon cutting celebration. SUBMITTED

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People who live in HOA communities are perfectly situated to benefit from Blue Zones Project and its Power 9 principles shared by the longest-lived people in the world.

They likely have a planned community with walking paths that help them “Move Naturally.”

There are probably volunteer opportunities, which help them have a “Purpose.”

And there might even be a restaurant where they can have “Wine at 5” with their “Right Tribe” and enjoy a “Plant Slant” dinner.

It’s no wonder more than 70 local homeowners associations (HOAs) are recognized with Blue Zones Project or in the process.

“An HOA is where the people are and is one of the places where we can get many people engaged with Blue Zones Project,” said Chante Pemberton, Faith Based Organization and HOA Lead for Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida.

HOAs can become part of Blue Zones Project by completing a checklist of items they already do and easily adding some other elements. For example, simply installing bicycle racks, organizing a walking group or planting a community garden are all encouraged.

During community events, Blue Zones Project suggests having healthy food options such as salad and fruit alongside other traditional food items.

“The list of best practices is very simple but meaningful,” Pemberton said. “It gets people thinking about steps they can implement to help make their community healthier.”

Natalie Lewis serves on the Blue Zones Project engagement committee at Vanderbilt Country Club and took part when her community first became involved 10 years ago.

“Health was a big issue for us,” Lewis

said. “We thought with our beautiful gym and very active people here, we could do something.”

Lewis started a walking group that meets every Wednesday. They initially carpoled to Vanderbilt Beach but, as the walkers got older, have found it easier to walk on firmer surfaces at places like the Gordon River Greenway.

“It’s hard to walk alone,” Lewis said. “People don’t like to do it. If you make it an event, it is much nicer.”

Until the pandemic, another group met for Wine at 5 in the clubhouse.

Over the years, their chef held cooking classes featuring Blue Zones plant-based recipes, and residents participated in the Purpose Workshop. They added meditation and yoga classes that included healthy snacks and conversation afterward.

Getting the restaurant to participate was a bit challenging, Lewis admits, because people thought things were going to be eliminated.

“People don’t want their salt or hamburgers taken away,” Lewis said. “But when they realized it wasn’t about taking away but providing choices, it was okay.”

They added healthier items to the menu, including kale salad, cauliflower crust pizza and a hummus plate with veggies. They also list healthier options such as fruit higher on the menu than fries.

Erika Rohde, president of the HOA in Delasol, said she also has “always been a fan” of Blue Zones Project.

“If you are socially engaged with other people, you’ll live a better life,” she said.

When the board realized that many neighbors didn’t know each other and that the community needed more activities, they reached out to Pemberton at Blue Zones Project.

“Once we engaged with Chante, we took off like a wildfire.” Almost 70 percent of Delasol residents signed the Power 9 pledge, a series of action steps to increase well-being.

“Once we joined Blue Zones Project, we saw a huge change in our community.”

The board started a social committee to get people out and active. They organized walking moais, yoga and bone builders classes, pickleball leagues, men’s and ladies’ social groups, and food and clothing drives for charity.

They’ve held cooking demonstrations and pot lucks where residents are asked to bring at least one healthy item.

“You’d be surprised how many people have changed their outlook,” Rohde said. “It’s not ‘bring the chocolate cake’ but ‘bring that and a veggie tray.’”

Barb Swendiman, who lives in Village-Walk of Bonita Springs, also found a fun way to get her neighbors involved in Blue Zones Project. She created a challenge with 23 activities associated with at least one Power 9 principle and gave prizes as rewards for participating.

“It was simple stuff to do,” Swendiman said, “like go for a walk with a friend at least once a week, try a Blue Zones recipe, take the age test, or give someone an unexpected gift. They were easy things you could do that are good for your well-being.”

Barbara Mariano lives in the latest Blue Zones Project community, Del Webb Naples in Ave Maria, and said it’s a perfect fit.

“Blue Zones is the life we live out here,” she enthused. “The community is very active. People are walking, biking, swimming, and playing pickleball and tennis and golf. We’re a very, very active community.”

To optimize well-being in your HOA community and partner with Blue Zones Project, contact Chante Pemberton at Chante.Pemberton@Sharecare.com.

Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc., Blue Zones Project is a vital part of Southwest Florida’s well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information about Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida, visit southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com.