

Immokalee Technical School takes on the Blue Zones Project

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Immokalee Technical College, also known as iTech, has joined a local campaign to help students and faculty get healthier.

The technical school that serves a key role in the migrant farmworking community to provide career opportunities for its young people is also setting an example by joining the Blue Zones Project of Southwest Florida.

The school that offers 21 programs of study — from culinary training to automobile service and a lot in between — has become Blue Zones approved by adding healthier options for students and faculty in the daily activities on campus.

The school has added a punch card system in the cafeteria where students are rewarded with bonus items for choosing healthier foods for meals. There also are healthier selections in

vending machines, and there are fresh water refill stations to reduce plastic waste and encourage more water consumption. Both students and staff members have started taking part in exercise contests and to improve body mass index.

The Blue Zones Project is a health and well-being initiative that was introduced to Southwest Florida in 2015 by the NCH Healthcare System, which is underwriting the initiative in the early years to help the campaign gain widespread support.

The project is based on the world travels of Dan Buettner, who identified communities worldwide where people share lifestyle traits and live to 100 or older. He wrote a New York Times best-seller about the nine principles of longevity.

The goal is for businesses, government agencies, restaurants, grocery

See BLUE, Page 7D



Dr. Allen Weiss, left, the president and chief executive officer of the NCH Healthcare System, welcomes iTech to the Blue Zones Project. NCH is a sponsor of the wellness initiative in Southwest Florida. BLUE ZONES PROJECT STAFF

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Continued from Page 4D

stores, churches, residential communities and other groups to voluntarily incorporate healthier options in daily practices so each group's audience can make better choices. The philosophy is that over time, healthier choices will become the easier choice, and each incremental step can improve health and well-being. Offering fresh fruit and bottled water instead of soft drinks and candy bars in employee break rooms is one example.

Southwest Florida is one of 37 communities nationwide that is either working toward recognition as a Blue Zones community or has achieved it by widespread adoption of nine underlying principles toward improved well-being.

The "Power Nine" include moving naturally by being physically active, eating a plant-slant diet, knowing your purpose in life, taking time to relax, having a healthy social network and putting loved

ones first. A popular activity is to form walking groups, or walking moais, to use Blue Zones terminology.

So far, 78 other companies have embraced the Blue Zones project by incorporating healthier choices, like adding walk and bike paths, sponsoring pot lucks for people to bond, offering onsite exercise programs, changing menus and more.

Two hotels have recently gained Blue Zones recognition for their initiatives. They are Naples Park Central Hotel and its sister hotel, Fairways Inn of Naples. Both have added bike racks for guests and staff to use, have launched walking groups for employees, have planted gardens on site and have added healthier selections in vending machines.

"Our hotels embarked on constructive steps to ensure that the well-being of our guests and staff is improved," said Maxine Mirowitz, co-owner of the hotels.

Naples Park Central, at U.S. 41 and Central Avenue, is a few blocks from the Gulf of Mexico and the city of Naples' renowned Fifth Avenue South. The Fairway Inn has been a 50-year landmark and is at 103 Palm River Blvd. in North Naples.