

“Don’t try to change people’s behavior because you’re going to fail. Change their environment.”

— Dan Buettner, author of “The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who’ve Lived the Longest”



Employees of The Boardwalk, an eatery on the campus of Florida Gulf Coast University, celebrate becoming a Blue Zones Project restaurant that promotes healthier food. BLUE ZONES PROJECT

Vi at Bentley Village, Boardwalk join Blue Zones

Liz Freeman Naples Daily News | USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Vi at Bentley Village has been approved as a Blue Zones Project worksite that promotes a healthy lifestyle among its workforce for the retirement community.

And The Boardwalk, an open-air bistro on the Florida Gulf Coast University campus, recently became the second restaurant in Estero to earn its Blue Zones approval.

Vi at Bentley Village, an upscale senior living community off U.S. 41 in North Naples, has about 600 employees, with about 40 percent of them signing the Blue Zones Project pledge to make changes in their lifestyle to be healthier and improve their longevity.

The management team at Vi was instrumental in collecting information and putting together a plan to gain the Blue Zones worksite designation, according to Pam Fultz, spokeswoman for the retirement community.

The Blue Zones Project is a health and longevity program developed in 2010 by National Geographic explorer Dan Buettner, who found common elements of longevity among residents of different communities around the world where people often live to 100 or older. He developed what he calls



Seniors gathered together for pool dancing at The Vi of Bentley Village to Mark National Senior Health & Fitness Day. The morning celebrated and highlighted seniors who stay active, and have fun doing it.

TOM GREENFIELD/SPECIAL TO THE NAPLES DAILY NEWS

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Pat Meyer uses a rowing machine in the fitness facility at the continuing care retirement community at Vi at Bentley Village resident in North Naples.
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the “Power Nine” principles of longevity and wrote a book, “The Blue Zones Project,” which became a New York Times best-seller.

The “Power Nine” principals 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 at worksites, which gets people active and engaging with one another.

Areas of the world where populations enjoy great longevity include Okinawa, Japan; Ikaria, Greece; and Sardinia, Italy.

The Blue Zones was introduced to Southwest Florida residents in 2015 by the NCH Healthcare System and its chief executive officer, Dr. Allen Weiss. NCH is underwriting the cost for Southwest Florida to become a Blue Zones community, which involves helping businesses, government entities, restaurants, grocery stores, residential communities and other groups commit to Blue Zones principles. The philosophy is that incremental changes in daily practices to be healthier will stick and become habit.

To date, more than 148 companies in the region have gained Blue Zones recognition.

To earn the worksite designation, Vi encouraged its workforce to form walking groups to take advantage of the more than 12 miles of walking paths on the 156-acre campus that offers residential apartments and care assistance to more than 800 seniors. There is a co-ed softball league that competes weekly in games, and there are “resident verses staff” living well competitions that include golf, croquet, bocce and trivia.

The Blue Zones project provides Vi an opportunity to enhance employee wellness, Penny Smith, execu-

tive director of Vi, said in a statement.

“Vi at Bentley Village is dedicated to providing an atmosphere that is conducive to healthy living and aging,” Smith said. “Our mission is to provide quality environments, services and programs to enrich the lives of older adults. Through our culture of caring, we aim to emphasize the importance of employees’ total well-being which is vital to the success of our business operations.”

On April 16, Buettner came to Southwest Florida to Florida Gulf Coast University, where about 2,000 people heard him speak about secrets of happiness, which is the subject of his latest book, “The Blue Zones of Happiness,” released in October.

After the speaking engagement, he was on hand for a ceremony to recognize The Boardwalk on the FGCU campus for becoming the second restaurant in Estero to earn its Blue Zones approval.

While The Boardwalk serves the faculty and students of FGCU, it is open to the public. The eatery added two new plant-based dishes to its menu, allows pets in the outdoor dining area and prohibits smoking.

“Because of the increasing rates of obesity, unhealthy eating habits and physical inactivity, we may see the first generation that will be less healthy and have a shorter life expectancy than their parents,” Tara Bencomo, director of marketing & guest experience for FGCU campus dining, said in a statement. “This is the grave statistic we heard when we first learned about Blue Zones Project that drove our commitment to the program.”

The university has a duty to feed students nourishing food that will feed their minds and bodies, she said.

“We want to be part of the solution to end this statistic and not only feed the students but also educate them on healthy eating habits,” she said. “The university environment is where students create habits that last a lifetime, and we believe that our dining program can work in conjunction with the classroom in preparing students for their future.”