

Julia Child lived a true Blue Zones centenarian life of passion and purpose into her 90s. - “Blue Zones” author Dan Buettner on Twitter



Staff at the Guadalupe Center in Immokalee celebrate becoming a Blue Zones Project worksite in Immokalee on Friday. LIZ FREEMAN/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

Immokalee center earns Blue Zones recognition

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Guadalupe Center in Immokalee is the first workplace in the rural farmworking community to earn Blue Zones Project certification for forging healthier futures for employees.

The more than 300 children in the early childhood program, in turn, will benefit from a healthier workforce, which furthers Guadalupe's mission of breaking the cycle of poverty and enriching children's lives.

"We want to lead by example, that is why the Blue Zones is so important," Dawn Montecalvo, president of Guadalupe Center, said at a ceremony Friday. "We hope to inspire other organizations."

Montecalvo was joined by employees and a handful of Blue Zones Project consultants to officially unveil the Blue Zones recognition.

Naples Mayor Bill Barnett attended the ceremony. He had suggested a while ago to Montecalvo that Guadalupe pursue the Blue Zones designation. The city of Naples joined the Blue Zones several years ago.

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"This just seemed to fall right into place," Barnett said.

The Blue Zones Project was introduced to the region in 2015 based on the 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 "Power Nine" include moving naturally by being physically active, knowing your purpose in life, taking time to relax, having a healthy social network and putting loved ones first.

Other Blue Zones principles include participating in a religious community, limiting alcohol consumption, eating a plant-slant diet and stopping to eat when you are 80 percent full.

Project consultants work with communities to identify strengths and gaps, and offer tools and resources so employers, schools, restaurants, grocery stores and other entities can take steps to make healthier choices easier.

The Guadalupe Center, at 509 Hope Circle, was founded in 1982, initially as a soup kitchen. Its scope was broadened to educational programs when volunteers observed children of migrant workers falling behind in school.

The center today has nearly 80 employees and is a vital link for services to families.

When Guadalupe Center submitted its completed application to the national Blue Zones program for review, word came back that it was the most thorough submission ever, said Tracey Villalba, worksite consultant with the Blue Zones Project in Southwest Florida.

"The healthier employees are, the healthier the company is," she said.

There are 18 classrooms at the main center with 270 children, from 6 weeks old to 5 years old, and there are another

three classes with 36 kids at a Lake Trafford location, Montecalvo said.

There is a waiting list of 463 children from Immokalee to enroll in the voluntary pre-kindergarten program, to get them ready for kindergarten so they can do well, she said. Fees are charged on a sliding scale basis, depending on family income.

The center also runs an after-school program and a tutor corps program to keep Immokalee teens in school and help them with college goals.

Dr. Allen Weiss, president and chief executive officer of the NCH Healthcare System, pointed out at the ceremony how the Blue Zones Project has been gaining ground in Southwest Florida. NCH is underwriting the Blue Zones campaign in Collier and south Lee counties.

Weiss said 15 percent of people in the community are taking part in the wellness initiative or they know of others whose lives have changed because of it.

Collier County residents overall have the longest life expectancy in the state and enjoy good health, all of which sets an example, he said.

"The rest of the state is lagging behind us," Weiss said. "And when you get children at this age on the right path, it is making a huge difference."

To earn designation as a Blue Zones worksite, staff evaluated core strengths of the center and enhanced them, said Beki Romeis-Markham, a curriculum specialist who was involved in the project.

There is a quiet zone where employees can enjoy down time, and there is a garden where employees and kids can tend to vegetables together, she said. Some remote parking spaces have gained Blue Zones signs to encourage walking, and employees have started holding walking meetings outside.

In the cafeteria, more fresh-grain foods, fruits and vegetable are being added. The center serves 19,000 meals every month for breakfast, lunch and snack time.