Is the Fountain of Youth in Minnesota?

By Fritz Lenneman
Oprah.com | November 19, 2009

In his book *The Blue Zones*, Dan Buettner introduces readers to the people who live the longest and shares their secrets to longevity. In early 2009, he brought those lessons to the small community of Albert Lea, Minnesota. The AARP/Blue Zones Vitality Project—in partnership with United Health Foundation—was a 10-month mission to find out if it is possible to increase the lifespans of residents by two years with simple changes. Buettner talks to Oprah.com about how the Vitality Project chose Albert Lea and how to make your home into a Blue Zone.

Fritz Lenneman: How did you become interested in Blue Zones, and where does the name come from?

Dan Buettner: For 20 years, I was an explorer, and you learn that to be relevant as an explorer it’s not only about going out in the world, it’s bringing back something that’s relevant for people. It’s no longer about making it to the top of a mountain, I don’t think, because they’ve been to the top of every mountain, and we’ve been to all the poles. I had done a series of scientific expeditions that sought to unravel ancient mysteries, and I more or less stumbled upon Okinawa about 10 years ago as a place that had the highest disability-free life expectancy in the world. So, in other words, people were living longer, healthier lives than any place else in the world, and I reasoned that there had to be a cultural explanation for that, not a genetic one, since it was a heterogeneous place. That was the initial idea.

FL: How did the Vitality Project start?

DB: I came back and wrote [*The Blue Zones*], and the book did well. I got to be on your boss’s program. But inevitably a question arises: Okay, so you've told us what the longest lived people in the world do—now how do we get people to do it?

I have a very good partnership with the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. And there’s a very highly regarded scientist there named Robert Jeffery. They call him the “obesity czar”—he’s been studying obesity long before it became an epidemic in this country. He’ll tell you that no diet in the history of the world has worked significantly for the long term. You can get people really excited about it for about six months, but then they kind of fall off the wagon. You lose about 90 percent of them in that first six months and the eight of the remaining 10 percent in the next two years. When it comes to longevity, diets don’t work. We have the mistaken belief here in
America that we can eat our way to health and longevity. And, in fact, the reverse of that is true.

Likewise, exercise programs: I'm very close to the people who own Life Time Fitness, and they'll tell you they get lots of people on in January, but an enormous percentage of them are gone by September and within three years they're almost all gone. So that isn't the ticket.

So then we started to think about how do you do a public health initiative that actually sticks? The central tenets of the Vitality Project is that if we can change people's environments in permanent or semipermanent ways, we can then affect long-term change. We found 28 research-backed interventions that will have a 2 to 5 percent impact on a population. We don't have to hit a home run with every one of them, or even any one of them, but the idea is that you add up the influence of 28 small things and you get a big impact. And that's indeed what happened.

FL: How did you choose Albert Lea?

DB: The University of Minnesota helped us find the profile of the town we wanted. We wanted a town that was statistically average when it comes to heart disease, cancer, rates of obesity. And we wanted the right size because we only had a certain budget and we wanted to affect the entire town. We couldn't take on Chicago. We had a budget for a place much smaller. Then we went on a road show. We went to five towns that met our criteria and showed them the Blue Zones, showed them a model of what we could aspire to with people around the world. Then we unveiled our "Blue Print," a change in the environment. And then we issued an [request for proposal], and all five of them came back. But Albert Lea provided the most convincing and compelling story for how they were going to make sure that all their population was going to participate.

FL: Is the Vitality Project still going on there?

DB: The training wheels are off. We were done as of two weeks ago, but we're still involved with making sure the programs and environmental changes we implemented stay implemented. They created a Vitality Center that they can cut the ribbon on. They started getting funding: United Health Foundation gave them funding, AARP gave them funding, YMCA gave them funding and the Mayo Clinic. So this idea is going to live on in Albert Lea, and we're there to facilitate it when we can, but we're focusing on taking the idea and bringing it to a bigger city.

FL: What were some of the things you did in Albert Lea to improve health?

DB: We worked with Brian Wansink, who wrote a book called Mindless Eating, from the Cornell Food Lab. He worked with us to create a process by which all people pledged to optimize their kitchens so they'd naturally eat less food or better food. For example, we sourced 10-inch plates so it was very easy to replace your 14-inch plates with 10-inch plates. Why did we do that? Because we know that people who eat off of smaller plates consume fewer calories over the course of a day. Every meal, they consume 20 to 25 percent fewer calories. Making that one environmental change makes a difference.

We weren't food Nazis saying, "Don't have any junk food around here." We're all going to have junk food around. But where you put that junk food in your kitchen has a profound impact on what you eat. So creating a space where you have to stoop down and it's out of sight. Giving in to those kind of habits has a measurable drop in how much junk food you eat.

We know from Okinawa that the person who provides food for the family, if the food is pre-plated at the counter, as opposed to served family style, the number of calories and the quality of those calories goes up. So we worked with Brian Wansink to create a countertop advertisement that you place, just a small reminder to
pre-plate food. That uses some of his food marketing concepts. And all they had to do was agree to display the thing. "For the time you're participating in the project, we want the sign on your counter. Do you agree to do that?" Yes. Boom, that's all they had to do. But we know that when you're constantly reminded, it changes behaviors. And it's mindless: You put it there once, and you're done.

**FL:** What are some key steps people can take to make their own space into a Blue Zone?

**DB:** Go into your cabinet right now, take all your 14-inch plates and give them away and buy 10-inch plates. The number one thing is take 5 minutes, write down the names of the people you hang out with. And ask yourself questions like: "Do these people encourage me to eat the right way? Do they encourage me to move? Do they make me feel positive or negative?" And just the act of writing that out, I think, will inform you on who you're spending your time with. Because realistically I can give people prescriptives, but they're going to read your article and they're going to forget it. But really making them realize for the first time the type of people they're hanging out with, I think is a really good exercise. And if they discover the people they hang out with tend to sit on the couch and eat chips or smoke or are toxically negative, then think about where can you go to augment your social circle. That's a big, important one, backed up by research.

If you're not volunteering, we know that people who volunteer have lower BMI, lower rates of cardiovascular disease and they have higher rates of well-being. So write down the types of things you like to do and then find a place to activate those. Put those to work in other people's lives. That is easy thing to do to live longer.

A Blue Zone tip that's easy to activate too: We know that people who eat nuts four times a week—about a handful—live two to three years longer than people who don't eat nuts. So having nuts around the house.

Go out and buy yourself a high-quality fruit bowl. Put it some prominent place, well-lit, in your kitchen, and keep it full. You will naturally consume more fruit. And we know that higher fruit and vegetable consumption is associated with higher longevity and lower rates of cancer and cardiovascular disease.

**FL:** What are the next places you're taking the Blue Zone Vitality Project?

**DB:** We've been talking to Nashville. We've been talking to Lincoln, Nebraska. We've been talking to St. Louis, Missouri. What's interesting is that all of these have come to us. Those three cities, of the 20 or so that contacted us, seem to be the most serious. I can't go into a city that doesn't want this and do it. I have to start with a city that has internal will and leadership that works well together.

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