

The Minnesota Miracle

The extraordinary story of how folks in this small town got motivated, got moving, made new friends, and added years to their lives. The best news? They're having so much fun, they can't stop. **BY DAN BUETTNER**



Fifty-two. That was Brian Mattson's life expectancy. Okay, he knew he was overweight and out of shape. But 52? He was already 38. "I'm a social worker, and my job is tough," he says. "Most nights I'd come home and watch TV and eat junk food. I was pretty isolated." He was also, he admits, depressed.

Brian learned his projected life span after using an online tool called the Vitality Compass, which calculates life expectancy based on diet, exercise, and other key indicators. And he did so on the noteworthy night of May 14, 2009—an evening that helped transform not only Brian Mattson's life but the lives of nearly everyone in Albert Lea, Minnesota, his picturesque hometown. Amid a pep-rally-like atmosphere in a high-school auditorium, the 18,000-resident community kicked off the AARP/Blue Zones Vitality Project, sponsored by the United Health Foundation, a radical yet fun-to-follow program to help people eat better, become more active, connect with one another, and find a greater sense of purpose.

These four basic behaviors lie at the heart of improved health and longevity, something I learned from traveling to areas I call Blue Zones: unique regions where people have the world's

longest life spans. The mission of the Vitality Project was to add healthy years to an entire town by weaving the Blue Zones principles into every aspect of the community—restaurants, businesses, schools, homes, and everyday lives.

With buy-in from the town's leadership, the transformation was remarkable. Dan Burden—a transportation expert who has helped more than 2,500 communities become more bike- and pedestrian-friendly—created plans to persuade residents to leave their cars at home. This included building a sidewalk loop around Fountain Lake, the town's stunning centerpiece. Nutrition and food-psychology expert Brian Wansink, Ph.D., author of *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*, went into Albert Lea's homes and restaurants to explain some simple tricks for healthier eating, such as using ten-inch plates and putting junk food on hard-to-reach shelves. Dietary expert Leslie Lytle, Ph.D., R.D., worked with grocery stores to label "longevity foods," and with schools to change their menus—and the eating habits of students. Richard Leider, author of *The Power of Purpose*, and his colleague Barbara Hoesle led seminars that encouraged participants to pursue their talents and passions.

THE POWER 9

Easy ways to boost longevity.

In 2000 a team of scientists and I began studying cultures where people live longest. The residents of these "Blue Zones" don't diet or belong to health clubs, but they do share common healthy behaviors. We call them the Power 9:

- 1 KEEP MOVING**
Find ways to move naturally, such as walking, gardening, using fewer labor-saving devices.
- 2 FIND PURPOSE**
And pursue it with passion.
- 3 SLOW DOWN**
Work less, rest, take vacations.
- 4 STOP EATING...**
...when you're 80 percent full.
- 5 DINE ON PLANTS**
Eat more veggies, and less meat and processed foods.
- 6 DRINK RED WINE**
Do it consistently but in moderation.
- 7 JOIN A GROUP**
Create a healthy social network.
- 8 FEED YOUR SOUL**
Engage in spiritual activities.
- 9 LOVE YOUR TRIBE**
Make family a high priority. *-D.B.*

The ultimate goal: for the people of Albert Lea to adopt these healthy habits so naturally, so painlessly, they wouldn't even realize how radically they were changing their lives. How well did it work? By the time the Vitality Project ended in October 2009 a total of 3,464 residents of all ages had participated. The life expectancy of the 786 residents who took the Vitality Compass before and after rose by an average of 2.9 years, and all say they feel healthier—physically and emotionally. Two-thirds of locally owned restaurants added life-extending foods to their menus, from berries to broccoli, and 35 businesses pledged to make their workplaces healthier by offering more nutritious catering menus and vending machine choices, and substituting fruit for doughnuts. Residents participated in 15 Vitality Project initiatives, says city manager Victoria Simonsen, from walking groups—including “walking school buses,” where parents and grandparents stroll with children to school—to healthy cooking classes. Each is expected to continue.

But more impressive than the numbers are the moving, motivating stories of the people who participated—the energetic folks who revitalized their bodies, their spirits, their lives, and their town.

“I Feel So Strong Now”

Albert Lea is a quintessential green-tree midwestern city, but Moraa Knoll found it less than idyllic. Fifty-two years old and a Kenyan by birth, she moved to Albert Lea in 2003 and struggled to connect with coworkers and neighbors. “I felt like people in America put fences around their lives,” she says. “I often felt misunderstood.”

Her health suffered. She gained weight, and she and her husband, Michael, developed diabetes. “I used to feel like I'd collapse when I had to climb stairs,” she says.

When the Knolls heard about the Vitality Project, they thought it would be a good way to improve their health, beginning with diet. One essential strategy is to reduce portion sizes gradually, and to make those smaller meals more nutritious. At first Moraa found herself craving junk food. “I was hungry from the smaller portions, and sometimes I really wanted a pizza or a cookie or to go to a fast-food restaurant,” she admits. “But I also wanted to change my health. I got rid of all the

junk food and sweets in the house. What I kept around was fruit, so when I was hungry, I learned to reach for an apple or a banana.”

Michael stayed active thanks to a side job delivering newspapers, but Moraa knew she needed to move more, so she joined two walking moais in her neighborhood. In Okinawa, a Blue Zone where average life expectancy is 82, moai is the word for a group of people who support one another for life. In Albert Lea roughly 600 citizens joined walking moais during the project, trading TVs and computers for group exercise. Biking and community gardening became popular as well.

The groups have enriched Moraa's life. “Those women reached out to me right away,” she says. “We began talking as we walked, and soon we were friends. That experience has made me open up to other people.”

Moraa now does occasional volunteer work, such as walking dogs for the Humane Society, with a moai friend, and she and Michael have dramatically improved their health: Moraa has lost about 30 pounds, Michael's waist size has dropped from 38 to 32, and their diabetes symptoms have virtually disappeared. “I'm almost nondiabetic now,” Moraa reports.

Eager to spread the Vitality Project's positive results, Moraa's church has formed a group to discuss their accomplishments and

HAPPIER, HEALTHIER

How the project changed lives



BRIAN MATTSON

Brian walks twice as much as before—and now eats stir-fry rather than pizza.



MORAA KNOLL

She's about 30 pounds lighter, and her life is richer from making new friends.



THE ABREGOS

No more junk food: it's all fruits and veggies for this committed couple.



CATHY PURDIE

The project inspired her to pursue an old dream: earning a bachelor's degree.

encourage others to trade French fries for fruit. “But whenever we meet,” she says, “we talk most about how people are connecting more because of the Vitality Project. It's made me feel better about Albert Lea—and America.”

“Eating This Way Has Helped Us Save Money”

Curly fries and curling irons were once a daily mix for 47-year-old Jackie Abrego. The owner of a hair salon, Jackie would frequently eat fast food with her employees. Yes, she and her husband, John, 50, have always been active—they bike and walk and chase their four young grandkids—but the Vitality Project, John says, “has really made us conscious of eating healthy.” Like Moraa, they've cut out junk food and fast food. “It was hard for me to give that up at first,” Jackie admits. “But I've always heard it takes 21 days to change a habit, and we were committed. We knew we had to continuously work the program, or we'd fall back into our old ways.”

Giving up fast food forced the couple to do more advance snack planning. Every Sunday night Jackie and John cut up vegetables and fruit together for the week. “It's become a kind of ritual we enjoy,” John notes. “Besides making us feel healthier, eating this way has actually saved us money: we pack good, healthful lunches for ourselves.”

The hair salon has also said goodbye to candy. “We’ve got a tray of fresh veggies out instead,” says Jackie. “One of the clients even brought us an enormous zucchini, and I made lots of zucchini bread and muffins from it and sent some to school with my niece as a snack.” Now that the schools have eliminated junk food, “the kids have really gotten onboard with this,” John says. “Even our oldest grandson—he’s six—asks for carrot sticks and broccoli to snack on when he visits us. And what he eats, the younger grandkids will copy.”

“I Used To Eat A Whole Lot of Cheesy Puffs...”

For Jen and Chris Chalmers, the Vitality Project has reinforced the good things they were already doing—and helped us to do more,” says Chris. The Chalmers—he’s 43, she’s 38—have three boys under ten, so they’re busy people, but Chris still volunteered to be a local cochair of the Vitality Project. Hoping to bring more movement into their lives, the Chalmers are biking to church on Sundays with their kids.

“It was fun for all of us and a great way to get our five-year-old to settle down for the service,” Chris says. “We’re also involved in the walking school bus in our neighborhood. It’s nice to see that gathering of different generations every morning, sometimes as many as 30 or 40 kids and the adults who are going to accompany them—grandparents, moms pushing strollers, and other older people in the neighborhood.

“Another thing we love is the sense of community at the weekly farmers’ market—we bike there with the kids, too. Since the project began, it’s been packed. More people are buying local produce instead of stuff that’s come from 1,500 miles away.”

Chris’s ten-year-old son, Sam, like all kids, picks up on what his family and his community are doing. “I’ve been thinking about what I’m eating,” he says. “I used to eat a whole lot of cheesy puffs. Now I know they’re not good for me, so I cut them out.

“I’ve met a lot more people around town at all of these Vitality Project events,” he adds.

“They talk about how in little towns everyone knows each other, but that wasn’t really true for me before. Now it is.”

“Isn’t It Wonderful about Brian?”

Brian Mattson, the social worker who was stunned to learn about his limited life expectancy, got involved in the Vitality Project for one reason: his mother. Jan Mattson is 66, fit, and an ambassador for the project. And she was worried about her son. “She badgered me into going to the Vitality Project start-up,” Bri-

portions. I’ve even given up putting sugar on my cereal. I didn’t know you could eat it without sugar,” he laughs.

Brian’s life is becoming sweeter (sans sugar) as well. “At night now I think to myself, ‘I’d rather go out walking than sit here alone.’ And I now average 12,000 steps a day.”

His mother is excited and relieved by the changes in her son’s life. “People are stopping me on the street and saying, ‘Isn’t it wonderful about Brian?’ “

As for Jan, she and her husband, Rory, 67, are

VIVA VITALITY!

The AARP/Blue Zones Vitality Project lives on, as Albert Lea civic leaders convert the first floor of a downtown building into a Vitality Center. To sustain that momentum, AARP has donated an extra \$10,000 to the town, and the United Health Foundation (UHF), which made the project possible with a \$750,000 grant, has provided another \$10,000. The Albert Lea Medical Center has also pledged \$25,000. Keeping the community engaged and connected is critical, says UHF executive director Daniel Johnson: “We believe that’s what ultimately will have the most dramatic impact on the health of the community.” The results “surpassed our expectations,” Johnson adds, but the best may be yet to come.

—Leslie Quander Wooldridge

an says. “But when I listened to what they were saying, I thought, ‘Okay, these are real simple changes, so why not try?’ “

He began by eating more fruits and vegetables. Then he joined a walking moai in his neighborhood and got a pedometer to measure the number of steps he took in a day.

“When I first began, I felt like, ‘My God, I’ve walked 6,000 steps and I think I’m gonna die.’ “ But Brian persevered. He began to feel better and became friends with the people in his moai, particularly 53-year-old Kevin Boyer.

“Sometimes when I’m out walking with Brian, I’ll say, ‘I’m this close to ordering a pizza.’ “ Kevin says, “and Brian’ll say, ‘I’m gonna go home and make stir-fry.’ Hearing that keeps me on the rails. I used to have a pizza every week, and I haven’t had one in months. I’m just eating a lot less. At first that was hard to manage, but I started using smaller bowls and plates, like the Vitality Project tells you to do, and it’s helped me control my

eating more fruits and vegetables as well. “And I cook with olive oil instead of butter,” she says. “Sometimes Rory complains about the smaller portions, but he’s getting used to it.”

For Brian, however, the Vitality Project changed far more than his waistline. It reinvigorated his outlook on life. “I took a purpose workshop, and it reminded me that I’m good at what I do—I have a natural talent to do social work,” he says. “These days at work I’ll try something off-the-wall, a new technique with a kid I’m helping. And I’m really pumped up about a role I have in a community-theater play. It’s small, but I haven’t done theater here in 15 years, and it’s something I love. It’s just incredible how much better I feel. About everything.”

Dan Buettner is the author of *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who’ve Lived the Longest*.