

Living Better, Longer

Why the Global Secrets of Longevity Are Ready to Ignite Tyler

by **Christi Khalaf**

Director of Community Collaborations, Health Foundation of East Texas

What if the secret to a long, vibrant life wasn't hidden in a high-priced bottle of vitamins or a grueling fitness routine? What if the key to reaching a healthy age 100 was woven into the very fabric of the community where you live, work, and play?

This is the paradigm-shifting premise behind Blue Zones—a global longevity movement that is officially putting down roots right here in East Texas. Through a partnership launched by the Health Foundation of East Texas and Blue Zones, our community is embarking on the Blue Zones Ignite Tyler initiative. This major community health assessment will evaluate how our policies and daily environments impact our well-being and design a

comprehensive plan to make healthy choices easier for everyone.

The story of the Blue Zones began over two decades ago when National Geographic Fellow Dan Buettner, Blue Zones founder, teamed up with demographers to identify and research longevity hotspots around the world. Buettner's expedition teams eventually identified five distinct locations where people outlived the rest of the world: Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; Nicoya, Costa Rica; Ikaria, Greece; and Loma Linda, California.

The most startling revelation from this ongoing 20+ year research study was that centenarians in these regions didn't strictly rely on diet and exercise. Instead, their environments were organized in a way that made healthy choices completely natural and

unavoidable, or easy.

Blue Zones researchers synthesized these shared behaviors into nine lifestyle habits known as the "Power 9." These principles span moving naturally, identifying a sense of purpose, prioritizing family, belonging to a faith-based community, and maintaining a heavily plant-based diet. According to Blue Zones research, genetics account for less than 20 percent of a person's overall lifespan. The remaining 80 percent is determined by lifestyle, surroundings, social circles, and structural connection to community.

Improving Well-Being Across America

Based on insights from their original research, Blue Zones has spent the past fifteen years working with dozens of communities

across the country to optimize the policies and places that shape daily life for their citizens so entire populations get healthier, together.

The Blue Zones Project model utilizes the Gallup Well-Being Index to scientifically measure a community's transformation by tracking five interconnected dimensions of life: career, social, financial, community, and physical health. By deploying comprehensive population surveys alongside individual assessments, Gallup establishes a baseline score for each community. This data is continuously blended with local social determinants of health to provide real-time, aggregated insight into population health trends.

Blue Zones Project in Fort Worth, Texas has yielded highly successful health, economic, and community improvements since launching in 2014, making it the largest certified Blue Zones Community in the United States. Between 2014 and 2018, Fort Worth jumped from 185th to 31st out of 190 metro areas in the national Gallup Well-Being Index. They achieved a 31% drop in adult smoking, lowered high blood pressure by 13% and lowered high cholesterol by 20%. In addition, they certified over 86 local restaurants and grocery stores to prioritize nutritious food accessibility.

In addition to Fort Worth, there are more than 80 communities and cities

across the United States that are using the Blue Zones Project framework, impacting, and improving the well-being of over five million Americans. These range from small communities in Minnesota to the islands of Hawaii.

Igniting Change in the Rose City

Now, it is Tyler's turn. Statistics show that East Texas currently faces poorer overall health outcomes and higher rates of chronic disease than many other parts of the state. Recognizing the need for a long-term, generational shift, the Health Foundation of East Texas kicked off the Blue Zones Ignite Tyler assessment.

The program launched with a public keynote event at the Tyler Rose Garden Center, drawing hundreds of passionate residents, business leaders, and health advocates. With months of primary and secondary research and a week-long visit to the Rose City, the Blue Zones team has been hard at work, assessing Tyler's food systems, built environment, public policies, workplace and school wellness standards, and most importantly, the community's readiness for a full-scale well-being improvement initiative. Once the assessment concludes, our community leaders will evaluate the findings to determine the next steps for a full-scale, multi-year community transformation.

The timing of the Ignite Tyler project

aligns beautifully with our city's broader visions for growth. As our leaders work to build a safer, more pedestrian-friendly downtown square and map out the next 20 years through the *Tyler Tomorrow* comprehensive plan, the Blue Zones framework ensures health is at the center of our development.

"We believe that Tyler and surrounding communities have a unique opportunity to work together across all sectors to improve well-being," Smittee Root, Executive Director of the Health Foundation of East Texas, shared during the project's launch. "The methods are proven, and the results will be transformational."

Cultivating an environment where our grandchildren can grow up vibrant and our grandparents can enjoy more healthy years requires cross-sector collaboration. From local restaurant owners adding wholesome menu options to neighborhood associations advocating for better walking trails, every sector plays a vital role.

By looking back at the ancient wisdom of the world's longest-lived cultures, Tyler is actively preparing to take a massive step forward. It is time to ignite our city's potential, reshape our environments, and build a healthier East Texas together.

