

COMPASSION STORY OF THE MONTH

# Blue Zones: Could Brattleboro become one?

By KATE ANDERSON  
AND JIM LEVINSON

Some of you may have heard about Blue Zones, or perhaps seen the documentary on Netflix.

A few years ago, Dan Buettner, a National Geographic Fellow and award-winning journalist, led a team on a search for places on Earth where people live the longest.

His term for these places was “blue zones.”

He and his team found five of them: Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; Nicoya, Costa Rica; Ikaria, Greece; and Loma Linda, Calif.

Studying these areas, they discovered that it was not just longevity — there was, in these blue zones, a greater sense of purpose, of connection and of happiness.

In exploring the reasons, they found that people did things together, exercised more, ate better and had spiritual dimensions to their lives.

In the Costa Rica Blue Zone community, a common understanding was “slow down — to make time for things that really matter.”

Buettner and his team then decided to try to create a blue zone. They picked a community in Minnesota, the town of Albert Lea, which was willing to give it a try, and did. One immediate step was to create groups wishing to walk together to develop friendships. Albert Lea initiated many of the recommendations found in Blue Zones, thinking which involved re-adjustments on an individual level as well as a community environment focus.

The results (including three years of longer life) appeared very quickly.

More towns — in California and Iowa — have decided to give it a go.

Which raises the question: Could Brattleboro become a blue zone?

We’ll be organizing a “Community Conversation” on the subject in the library this spring, and hope many of you will join as we explore this.

Meanwhile, a few thoughts on the subject. First, in our initial conversations about Blue Zones, there’s



REFORMER FILE PHOTO

## Downtown Brattleboro

been general agreement that longevity, per se (although maybe a pleasant byproduct), ought not to be the primary motivation for initiating such a project.

More important may be the question of why this longevity takes place. The sense of blue zone “connectiveness” and common purpose seem every bit as important.

The attributes of Brattleboro, notwithstanding the perplexing issues which clearly exist, compel us to consider what underlies health and wholeness in a community. Buettner contends that “challenges can result in resilience” as was found in studying the Blue Zone community in Greece. Resilience is not just going back to a former condition; resilience includes being adaptive.

Buettner provides the useful insight that while individual decisions regarding eating well, exercising and focusing on relationships are exactly that, i.e., individual efforts, the community structure is a necessary part of the equation.

Our discussions, in turn, have circled back to the idea that we are talking about quality of life more than quantity of years.

Windham Aging informs us that Vermont is getting older fast. There are more people per capita over 65 than all the other states save Maine, and Windham County has more over 65 (per capita) than any other county in Vermont. At the same time Windham Aging’s findings state the following:

“Vermonters in Windham County want to be self-determined, connected and fulfilled with health systems of support that work for everyone.” Can we get there from here?

Brattleboro is more than wealthy in what’s referred to as social capital, in outdoor resources including an abundance of trails, ice-skating on the Meadows, a scenic landscape, access to various sporting possibilities, a genuine wealth of arts and cultural learning, performances, galleries, outdoor theater, an inviting built form of the

downtown, a regionally renowned Farmers Market, social, civil, religious, consumer needs, service organizations, and more, — they’re all available.

This is a wonderful context, but let it be emphasized that it is the people of the community that cause social capital to offer its real value.

In that regard, it might seem that a community that has responded with such extraordinary open-heartedness in welcoming our new neighbors from Afghanistan might be a natural for Blue Zone consideration. A concern sometimes raised, however, is that the Brattleboro area is too rife with political divisiveness to consider aiming for such standing, which is so much about harmony and doing things together. Isn’t being healthier, happier, more communicative, more patient, more loving and less lonely dependent on a shared vision?

In fact, efforts exist to address the problem. Our local “Compassion in Common” and the national “Braver

Angels” initiatives are designed explicitly to bring people together across these political divides. (This subject will also be the topic of a set of Community Conversations in the library this spring).

Willa Cather’s last message to her countrymen and women was this: “This is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great.”

Blue Zones, as Buettner has envisioned, are unique sorts of places where the activity, wisdom, caring of the elder segment of the community is vibrant and included. But, for a fully vibrant zone, a Brattleboro that thrives, a Brattleboro where we want to be, this has to be as true for the 70-year-old as it is for the child and everyone in between.

It is vital to see each other, to hear each other. The disenfranchised under-employed 25-year-old will one day be the centenarian. And so, for the conversation to really impact Brattleboro, the need is to find, to acknowledge, to articulate, as best we can, the connective tissue.

If we accept what we have in our presence and, acknowledge it, might we find the wish to release resistance and circumvent obstacles into moving forward with a beautiful articulation of a blue zone? The argument then could be made that a Blue Zone is not really about aging well as much as it is about identifying and putting into practice those elements of an age well-lived. Yes, starting at the start, our very young, and going on to our youth, our middle years, our elder years.

And finally, just waiting to say this: if this is blue sky thinking, we’re all for it!

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: [compassionstory@gmail.com](mailto:compassionstory@gmail.com) or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, PO Box 50, Marlboro, VT 05344. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months. Our website is: [www.compassionatebrattleboro.org](http://www.compassionatebrattleboro.org)