

Can people live well into their 90s and be happy, too?

Tom Gallagher | Sep. 11, 2013 Mission Management

This past February in Riverside, Conn., Msgr. Alan Detscher, pastor of St. Catherine of Siena, my parish, stepped to the microphone at the end of Mass to make a few announcements. His final announcement was to ask Caroline Dulcibella, who was sitting in the middle of the church, to stand and accept the community's applause: Dulcibella turned 97 years old that day. She beamed and waived. We applauded and were amazed.

As surprising as it was to see a petite but strong nonagenarian at church that day, the fact is that we are living longer, some into their 100s. In 1900, the life expectancy was just 46-48 years. Between 1980 and 2010, life expectancy at birth in the United States increased from 70 to 76 years for males and from 77 to 81 years for females, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Can people live well into their 90s and 100s and be happy too?

Yes, says Dan Buettner, a *New York Times* best-selling author, and founder and CEO of Blue Zones. For 10 years, Buettner has studied and written about people who have lived long and measurably happy lives in the "blue zone."

Buettner collaborated with the *National Geographic* to find and study the world's longest-lived people. With the help of demographers, he found pockets of people around the world with the highest life expectancy or the most people who reach age 100. Five places fit the criteria: Barbagia region of Sardinia; Ikaria, Greece; Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica; Seventh Day Adventists believers around Loma Linda, Calif.; and Okinawa, Japan.

With the help of a diverse group of experts, Buettner identified nine common characteristics found in people with the highest life expectancy (see below). Buettner discovered that such long-lived people have a strong sense of purpose, stay active, eat healthy foods and practice a faith tradition, among other key traits. It turns out that Dulcibella incorporates many attributes into her daily life consistent with Buettner's findings.

Born in 1916 in Danbury, Conn., Dulcibella, a retired public health nurse, credits her longevity to having good genes from her parents. Of her seven siblings, only her 88-year-old sister, Lucy, of Georgetown, Texas, and her 92-year-old brother, Peter, of Silver Spring, Md., are living.

She attended St. Francis Nursing School in Hartford, Conn. Shortly thereafter, she became an Army nurse and went to Europe during World War II. After the war, she received a degree in public health from New York University on the GI Bill.

Though she never married, Dulcibella has always been connected to people in her role as a public health and school nurse in Norwalk and Greenwich, Conn. She retired in 1978.

"The entire nursing staff was fond of Carrie and sought out her expertise in many matters," said Barbara Ward Bilek, a former staff nurse and former director of public health nursing for the Division of Family Health in Greenwich, Conn. "As a senior nurse, Carrie was instrumental in orienting new staff, including me. She was a

mentor for many nurses."

"The vocation of being a nurse remains strong in Caroline, as does her Catholic faith," Detscher said. "In fact, the one nourishes the other. In her mid-90s, she still cares for the residents of Hill House [the retirement community where she lives] and even brings them holy Communion when they are unable to attend Mass. For Caroline, the physical and the spiritual are intimately connected."

Today, Dulcibella lives in a nursing home only 50 yards from the church and walks back and forth to Mass with the help of a walker. A daily communicant, Dulcibella has been active in the parish as a member of the choir and as a religious education teacher.

"I don't like to take medicine, so I try to heal myself," she said. "I take six vitamins a day and one multivitamin," she said. Staying physically active is important to her. "I used to bowl and was on a bowling team," she said. "I also try to be ambulatory as much as I can."

Another key to a long happy life is her spiritual outlook. "God has the last say," she said.

"I believe strongly in personal prayer, especially the rosary. I try to say it daily. I think it has helped give me a great deal of strength and going to Mass."

"I pray for people in my family that they have a happy death. I pray for peace in the world, in our homes and in our family," Dulcibella said.

"At 97 years old, every day is a premium," she said.

'Power 9' tips for longer life

With the help of medical researchers, anthropologists, demographers and epidemiologists, Dan Buettner identified nine characteristics commonly found among the world's longest-lived people. What he calls the "Power 9" list includes:

- **Move naturally:** The world's longest-lived live in environments that constantly nudge them into moving without thinking about it. For example, they grow gardens and don't have mechanical conveniences for house and yard work.
- **Purpose:** They know "why I wake up in the morning" and this adds seven years of extra life expectancy.
- **Down shift:** Blue Zone people experience stress like the rest of us, but have routines to shed that stress. Okinawans take a few moments each day to remember their ancestors, Adventists pray, Ikarians take a nap and Sardinians do happy hour.
- **Eighty percent rule:** They stop eating when their stomachs are 80 percent full.
- **Plant slant:** Long-lived people have diets centered on beans and eat meat only five times per month.
- **Wine at 5:** Blue Zone people (except Adventists) drink alcohol moderately and regularly. Moderate drinkers outlive non-drinkers.
- **Belong:** All but five of the 263 centenarians Buettner interviewed belonged to some faith-based community. Denomination doesn't seem to matter. Research shows that attending faith-based services four times a month will add four to 14 years of life expectancy.
- **Loved ones first:** Successful Blue Zone centenarians put their families first. This means keeping aging parents and grandparents nearby or in the home. (It lowers disease and mortality rates of children in the home too.) They commit to a life partner (which can add up to three years of life expectancy) and invest in their children with time and love.
- **Right tribe:** The world's longest-lived people chose -- or were born into -- social circles that supported healthy behaviors. Good and bad habits are contagious. So social networks have favorably shaped long-

lived people's health behaviors.

Other commonalities among Blue Zone cultures included staying active, socializing regularly, and having a "daily sacred ritual," a time for prayer, meditation, or napping, said Buettner in a recent interview with *Everyday Health*.

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*'s regular Mission Management column. His email address is tom@tomgallagheronline.com [1].]

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[1] <mailto:tom@tomgallagheronline.com>