

Going Blue  
Staff writer Alston Doyle

Blue Zones are “hotspots” in just a few places around the world that have a rare population of people with low chronic disease rates and who live longer than any other place worldwide. Even though these places are thousands of miles away from one another, people who live in blue zones share a common lifestyle that has caused them to share these special characteristics. Meanwhile, in the United States, based on data from the Harvard School of Public Health in April 2023, life expectancy has dropped to 76.4 years which is the lowest in almost 2 decades. For comparison, the US life expectancy in 2019 was 78.79 years. Though this decline is partly from Covid-19 related deaths, it is also affected by lifestyles.

Data from the CDC “NCHS Data Brief” from December 2022 says that in 2021 the leading cause of death in the US was from heart disease. Yet, in Loma Linda, California; a Blue Zone, the opposite has been happening. In this town, there is a population of about 9,000 Seventh-Day Adventists, a Christian denomination that was founded in the 1840s. These adventists believe that maintaining a healthy body and lifestyle is vital to be able to worship God to the fullest. They practice daily moderate exercise, spending time with friends, community service, and taking time out of their days to rest and focus on God. They eat meat sparingly, have light dinners, eat many plants and nuts. Due to these differences, Seventh-Day Adventists have a life expectancy that is 10 years longer than the average American’s.

In order to improve the quality of life, health, and life expectancy in the USA, one lifestyle change that is necessary is increasing the amount of daily exercise. This doesn’t have to be intense, it can be regular, low-intensity exercise like the people of Loma Linda partake in. They have walking groups and pickleball clubs that not only provide a workout but also provide people with time spent with friends.

Movements as simple as those can have a big impact on health. Still, according to various sources, the overall population is experiencing a health crisis; the American Heart Association says 121.5 million adults have cardiovascular diseases, the American Liver Foundation says over 100 million people have some form of liver disease, the American Lung Association says 24 million live with chronic lung disease, and the Alzheimer's Association says 6 million Americans have Alzheimer's. Though America has some of the best hospitals in the world, there is not a national disease preventative system in place. One thing that needs to be normalized in American society that will change long-term health and prevent these diseases is diet. School lunches are a place to start.

“We could pay more attention to what people are buying at Flick [food service for St. Andrew's],” St. Andrew's Nurse Jessica Goldsbury said, “and that is a conversation that we are already having, knowing what people are buying and how they can eat well.”

The St. Andrew's cafeteria already has healthy options such as the salad bar, fruit cups, sandwiches, and free water but the unhealthy options outweigh them. Hamburgers, fried chicken sandwiches, pasta, more meats, pizza, chips, sugary drinks populate student snack and lunch options. There is even candy at the checkout like you would see in a grocery store. “I don't think we have great diets here,” Goldsbury said. “I don't see people eating very healthy at school. The people I end up seeing are the people [who] have trouble eating, maybe drink a lot of caffeine, maybe only eat chips for lunch.” Unhealthy diets will lead to problems. “Acute symptoms I have seen on a daily basis,” Goldsbury said, “are headaches and stomach aches.”

These small, chronic problems affect day-to-day life. Some can be countered by simply making healthier eating decisions but they can't be solved without a shift in the way America

thinks. “I think the community could be better,” Goldsbury said, “about recognizing unhealthy habits and talking about them.”

The stark contrast between the average American and the people of Loma Linda, California can be changed if people work together to boost lives. Encouraging community improvement through communal exercise and healthy eating habits is a very important step to improving health. People need to work together to change minds and focus on improving their lifestyle. The effects of reevaluating lifestyle choices will make it clear that habits have a big impact on overall health and well-being. “I think if we continue to do health and wellness assemblies,” Goldsbury said, “that would help drive the fact that we care about your wellness and we care about you.”