

# The Morning File: Minnesota town goes crazy over turning healthy

Friday, October 16, 2009

By Gary Rotstein, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

We don't write much about Albert Lea, Minn., around these parts. Usually, it's just to note that some school bus slid off a highway there during a storm (see your Post-Gazette of Nov. 11, 1998) and move on.

But we're intrigued with the latest community project in Albert Lea, a community of 18,000 -- not to be confused with Grammy Award-winning guitarist Albert Lee, who's just, like, one dude.

In its "Vitality Project," undertaken with AARP and United Health Foundation, the whole town has gone bonkers trying to get healthier. Residents spent 10 months trying to eat better, walk more and do everything short of an Ironman Triathlon to show their fitness.

The result, announced this week by project organizers, is that life expectancy of your average Albert Leater (Leaian? Leaite?) increased by 3.1 years. We know what you're thinking: Why would anyone want to suffer through three more Minnesota winters that they could have avoided by simply dying like normal?

That kind of negative attitude is a bit counter to the whole Vitality Project, we're assuming, so please keep it to yourself.

Live long while sparing the guilt

Here's some of the things that came about in Albert Lea through this project:

- Speeded-up construction of sidewalks and bike trails to get people out of their cars.
- Development of community food gardens, and new restaurant menus emphasizing healthy options such as salads.
- Work breaks during the day in which businesses gave their employees time to exercise.
- "Walking school buses" for children, which involved parents and grandparents escorting groups of students to school on foot instead of giving them rides.
- A German-accented dominatrix assigned to every household to yell at anyone caught eating snacks and to otherwise intimidate those failing to get with the program. (Oops, sorry -- this one isn't true, but we'd like someone to try it and analyze the results.)

Actually, said project creator Dan Buettner, "The key to success was staying away from guilt, struggle and sacrifice. ... Instead, we based the project on ... improving habitat, social networks, community infrastructure and the residents' sense of purpose."

It's just as good as living in Okinawa

Mr. Buettner developed the idea as a result of research for his 2008 book, "The Blue Zones," which examined areas around the world where people tend to live longer and healthier lives.

If you're thinking Pittsburgh must have been one of those areas, you've obviously never been to Sandcastle or Kennywood on a hot, body-baring day. The locations researched by Mr. Buettner included Okinawa, Sardinia and Costa Rica, which if you know anything about geography, are all more than an hour's drive from Forbes and Fifth avenues.

But here's the good news: The Minneapolis Star Tribune reports that "Buettner's organization plans now to choose one or two larger cities for Blue Zones projects." Hey, that could be us!

"Overall, this is a huge success," said Albert Lea city Manager Victoria Simonsen, even though fewer than the goal of 5,000 residents directly participated. "People are walking, they talk about food choices, they volunteer for loads of things. They're changing their lives."

As part of the effort, hundreds of residents now wear blue plastic bracelets emblazoned with the Okinawan phrase "hara hachi bu." We would have thought that translates as, "We can't have fun any more," but the Star Tribune reported that it carries a meaning reminding wearers to stop eating once they feel 80 percent full.

Yeah, we can imagine such bracelets selling like hotcakes in Pittsburgh, all right -- but only if the hotcakes are lathered with butter and syrup (and some whipped cream on top wouldn't hurt, either).

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