



Authority Magazine

Healthy to a Hundred: Barbara Sullivan of Village to Village Network On 5 Things You Need to Live a Long, Healthy, & Happy Life



An Interview with Savio P. Clemente

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The term Blue Zones describes places where people live long and healthy lives. What exactly does it take to live a long and healthy life? What is the science and the secret behind longevity and life extension? In this series, we are talking to medical experts, wellness experts, and longevity experts to share "5 Things You Need to Live a Long, Healthy, & Happy Life." As a part of this series, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing the national director of Village to Village Barbara Sullivan.

The Village to Village Network represents 350 Villages throughout the United States and three other countries around the world. Villages are community-based, nonprofit, grassroots organizations that connect members to a wide array of practical support services and social connections that enable older adults to enjoy a rich, independent, and healthy quality of life when they choose to age in their homes and communities.

Thank you so much for joining us! Our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your ‘backstory?’

I’ve been involved in the healthy aging-in-place movement since 2001, when I joined Paul Spring Retirement Community to head the marketing and business development team. While focusing on senior issues, I continued my education in eldercare, and in five years I completed my certification with the Commonwealth of Virginia’s Board of Long-Term Care Administrators. By 2007, I was serving in an advisory role in the rapidly expanding Village movement to help seniors stay in their homes and age in place. I served from 2008 to 2010 on the Board of Directors for the first suburban Village, Mount Vernon at Home. Later in 2010, I became the Executive Director of Mount Vernon at Home. In 2018, I was appointed the National Director of Village to Village Network (VtVN). VtVN is the national association that represents 350 Villages throughout the United States and four countries around the world, helping adults lead longer, happier and healthier lives at home.

Can you share the most interesting story from your career? Can you tell us what lessons or ‘takeaways’ you learned from that?

One of the most motivating stories from my career may seem a little simple, but it has huge meaning to me. A woman involved in one of our Villages lived on a hill and had physical limitations walking. She was having trouble getting to her mailbox at the curb each day to pick up her mail. She loved getting her mail, as many of her family lived in England. She called our office to inquire about moving her mailbox closer to her house. She didn’t know who to ask. It was a dignity issue because she didn’t want people to feel sorry for her — and was proud of her independence and didn’t want to show anyone her limitations.

So, I went to the post office and asked if we could move the mailbox closer to her home. The postmaster said it could not be moved, and that it would be a federal crime if we were to move it without their permission. I was flabbergasted. How did they expect this woman to get her mail? But then the postmaster offered to visit her and look at her situation. He went to her house, looked and agreed to move the mailbox for her. It made her day and gave her peace of mind. The mail was a huge thing for her, and she knew she would continue to receive those cards and letters.

The lesson I learned from this is that sometimes the people who may appear to be

difficult will work with you if you are willing to ask. You want to do a good deed and your hands are tied and you think you can't do something — but really you can — someone in the community can step in and help.

The other takeaway from this experience is that sometimes something small can make a big difference. The simplest of gestures can create good feelings and change. Sometimes a small thing can be huge.

None of us can achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful for who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

My dad helped me get where I am today. He was a former member of Congress and a U.S. Ambassador. While in Congress, he served as the chairman of the Select Committee on Aging. He had a lot of foresight about where we should be as a society when it comes to aging and realized that people needed ways to age well, and independently, in the communities where they live.

At the time, I was in the throes of working and raising children, and I got an opportunity to help aging adults. The opportunity was a career change, but my father encouraged me to consider it — not just on the merits of what the job offered me, but on the merits of what I wanted in a job. I remember how I used to go to visit nursing homes with him when he was an estate attorney. As a young girl, I was always drawn to older people. For some reason, working with older adults resonated with me, and I have my father to thank because he nurtured that in me.

When I went back to school to get my administrator's license in managing programs for seniors it was tough for me — it was torturous actually — because I had so many responsibilities with my job, my family and my schooling. But along the way my parents — especially my dad — gave me the encouragement to take the next step. My dad really saw and projected what we needed in an aging America.

You are a successful leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?

I would say being strong, patient and hard-working are my three character traits that have been instrumental to my success.

My mother raised my sisters and me to be strong women. She taught us to be independent thinkers and told us that we can do anything we want to do. And that's a

character trait I hope I pass down to my granddaughters. An example of being strong is over the last 9 months, as my husband was dying, I continued to balance work life, home life, and caregiving.

I have the patience of Job, the character in the Bible. This is important in the workplace. Having the patience to work with others and value their opinions is important.

Early in life, I learned the value of hard work. My parents owned a marina, and we were working before we had working papers because it was a family-owned business. I was working out on the dock at age 12 with boaters. We learned the value of hard work, money and saving. My father bartended through law school — it's a work ethic he passed down to us. I hope that I have passed it down to my own children. I don't think I could ever not work. It is just instilled in me.



Ok, thank you for all that. Now let's shift to the main focus of our interview about health and longevity. To begin, can you share with our readers a bit about why you are an authority in the fields of health, wellness, and longevity? In your opinion, what is your unique contribution to the world of wellness?

I think my unique contribution to the field is my experience in fostering and supporting a network in hundreds of communities that are helping people age at home — and helping them live healthier, longer and more vibrant and fulfilling lives. What we have found is that people age better — TOGETHER.

A 2010 survey by AARP found that nearly 90 percent of older adults in America want to stay in their homes and communities as they age. The Village model helps older adults to age in a place of their choosing, connected to their communities with the practical supports and tools they need to create successful aging of their own design.

Villages are well positioned to improve the population health of the communities they serve. In Britain and the United States, roughly one in three people older than 65 live alone, and in the United States, half of those older than 85 live alone. Studies in both countries show the prevalence of loneliness among people older than 60 ranging from 10 percent to 46 percent. The Village Model works! Village members consistently report a positive impact on their well-being and quality of life as a direct result of their participation in their Village.

Seekers throughout history have traveled great distances and embarked on mythical quests in search of the “elixir of life,” a mythical potion said to cure all diseases and give eternal youth. Has your search for health, vitality and longevity taken you on any interesting paths or journeys? We’d love to hear the story.

I don’t think my brain functions that way. I’d love to say I’m a dreamer but I’m a very practical person. I wish I were artsy. I wish I could say I had a golden lamp that I could rub. Back in 1992 when I was doing meeting planning, I went on a journey to China, and walked on the Great Wall – that was an incredible experience. I took advantage of every opportunity I could to travel. I’ve been to China, Hong Kong, Alaska and Europe. While I didn’t necessarily do those to look for an elixir of life, I do think that travel and learning aid your longevity, and help you realize how much is in front of you. I encourage others to grab the opportunity to travel while they can so they can see these beautiful destinations.

Based on your research or experience, can you please share your “5 Things You Need to Live a Long & Healthy Life?” (Please share a story or an example for each)

The five things you need to live a long and healthy life are community, health, and connections with others and access to affordable services.

You need a community. Five years ago, we moved from the Washington, D.C. area to a new town. I jumped in with both feet when we moved to our home and found a community waiting for me. I met neighbors by getting involved in a community event to restore a beautiful century-old fountain down the street. Those same community

members rallied around me when my husband passed away.

To lead a long and healthy life, we need the ability to stay healthy. Exercise and mindfulness are great, and it is important to keep active within your health sphere.

Connections with others are the key. I have been amazed at how many people have reached out to connect with me since my husband died. I heard from a former member about a kind deed I did in a condolence card. You don't realize that there are so many people around you who are connected to your life in so many ways until you go through a life experience, and then those connections help you through.

Family — family is everything — my children, my siblings, my nieces and nephews — they are everything. We have a very tight family structure and I've really emphasized this value to my children. We lead by example and family means everything.

Access to affordable services, such as transportation, health and wellness programs, technology support, home repairs, social and educational activities —are all important. A great example of this is the COVID-19 and Influenza Vaccine Uptake Initiative. The VtVN was awarded a grant from the National Council on Aging, this grant is helping us set up a robust vaccination initiative around the country through villages. The program is supported with funding from the Administration for Community Living, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Our Villages are doing things like offering rides to vaccine clinics and reaching out to new audiences to invite them to the events.

Can you suggest a few things needed to live a life filled with happiness, joy, and meaning?

I think being ok with yourself is really important. You must like yourself, and you have to like who you are and be comfortable in your own skin as you age. And I really truly believe it's in your power to be happy or not happy. I choose to be happy. We all go through sad parts in our lives. Life is not a dress rehearsal. We only get one good one.

Some argue that longevity is genetic, while others say that living a long life is simply a choice. What are your thoughts on this nature vs. nurture debate? Which is more important?

Personally, I think it's up to God. But at the end of the day — it is a combination. It's both nurture and nature. I know plenty of folks who are 80 and spry and running around. I know others who are younger, who I don't think will make it to their 70s. You

must really love yourself and take care of yourself as you age. You can make smart choices, but genetics play a role too.

Life sometimes takes us on paths that are challenging. How have you managed to bounce back from setbacks to cultivate physical, mental, and emotional health?

Every situation is different. It's always day-to-day. I don't have a crystal ball, and I don't know what tomorrow will bring. Once I was working in a retirement community and someone treated me very unfairly and that was hard. My Dad said, "that's not the job for you." And he was right. I moved into a different job that led me to where I am now. What's the saying, when a door closes, another window opens? Something else comes along. Always.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote?" Do you have a story about how that was relevant in your life?

My mantra is the choices we make now, determine the choices we have in our future. I still believe that. When my boys were on a religious retreat, we had to write a note for them, and I included this mantra in my note to them.

I also like, "grow old with me, the best is meant to be." It's by poet Robert Browning and encourages us to look at life as a full circle, not as something we are losing. It's very true.

You are a person of enormous influence. If you could start a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

Well, I am already part of a huge movement — the Village to Village Network. I would love to see our network grow and for Villages to be set up in more communities. All it takes to get started is a committed working group and we offer a toolkit to help.

There are a lot of benefits to being involved in the Village movement as we help people age independently, where they are. People gain more of a sense of purpose from involvement in a Village program — because they are getting together with new friends and doing something constructive in building the Village. At the end of the day, we all want purpose and something meaningful. Our members also volunteer and give back to the community in a wide range of ways. They are part of an organization that they collectively help to create but are actively involved with.

What is the best way for our readers to continue to follow your work online?

You can go to our website, <https://www.vtvnetwork.org/> and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#).

This was very inspiring. Thank you so much for the time you spent on this. We wish you continued success.

About The Interviewer: Savio P. Clemente coaches cancer survivors to overcome their confusion and gain the clarity needed to get busy living in mind, body, and spirit. He inspires health and wellness seekers to find meaning in the “why” and cultivate resilience in their mindset. Savio is a [Board Certified Wellness Coach](#) (NBC-HWC, ACC), #1 [best-selling author](#), [syndicated columnist](#), [podcaster](#), stage 3 cancer survivor, and founder of [The Human Resolve LLC](#). He has interviewed notable celebrities and TV personalities and has been featured on Fox News, The Wrap, and has worked with Authority Magazine, Thrive Global, BuzzFeed, Food Network, WW and Bloomberg. Savio has been invited to cover numerous industry events throughout the U.S. and abroad. His mission is to provide clients, listeners, and viewers alike with tangible takeaways on how to lead a truly healthy, wealthy, and wise lifestyle. Savio pens a weekly [newsletter](#) in which he delves into secrets to living smarter by feeding your “three brains” – head, heart, and gut – in the hope of connecting the dots to those sticky parts of our nature that matter to living our best life.