

## [Hope Dancing: Finding purpose and a place to serve among the Maya](#)

If you've ever despaired at the state of the world or doubted the power we each have to profoundly change lives for the better, you must read the story of how Leslie Baer Dinkel and a handful of like-minded friends changed the course of tens of thousands of lives in Guatemala.

The Key to a Long, Healthy Life? A Sense of Purpose  
By Leslie Baer Dinkel

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Since the 1970s, the people of Okinawa have been studied for their longevity. There are at least 400 documented centenarians living there (earning their small island home the moniker, “The Land of Immortals.”) That’s more people who are over the age of 100 per every 100,000 people than any other place in the world. The obvious question—and exactly what the various studies have been designed to find out—is *why*?

Studies have confirmed that Okinawans have great genetics, but also, score off the charts on health markers attributed to lifestyle. These include lower levels of “free radicals” in their blood (a cause of inflammation), ultra-healthy hearts, a significantly lower propensity to develop cancer, super-strong bones, more sex hormones in older age, and a lower incidence of dementia. They tend to be leaner and more energetic for their age than us mere mortals.

All these advantages, the researches posit, are the consequence of daily exercise and a unique diet<sup>1</sup> low in calories and rich in vegetables (58% of their diet), soy products (5%), whole grains (33%) and occasional, small amounts of pork and fish (2%); and other (2%). The problem with this explanation alone is that other populations (particularly in Japan) have diet and exercise patterns similar enough that they, too, should produce a bump in longevity—but they don’t.

What could the secret ingredient be that causes Okinawans to be the longest-living people on the planet? As it turns out, they also report being happier than the rest of us. Researchers think there could be a connection.

To find out, one research team focused on the idea of “happiness,” and what it means to Okinawans. Their descriptions most often boiled down to four components: (1) A positive outlook on life; (2) strong coping skills; (3) a deep sense of spirituality, and lastly, (4) a strong sense of purpose in their lives. That fourth component, researchers suspect, could be the “secret sauce” for the longevity seen in Okinawans.

Throughout their lives, Okinawans have specific roles—a purpose for their life—that fits their age and abilities. Their language doesn’t even have a word for the idea of retirement. In older age, one of their explicit roles is to pass their wisdom on to the young. The Okinawan notion of lifelong purpose is so central to their culture, in fact, that it has a name: *ikigai*. This six-letter word is overflowing with meaning, translating, roughly, to *a reason for being, joy, well-being, and a sense of purpose*.

Who among us is not invigorated by our own sense of purpose? It can come from fully applying ourselves with enthusiasm in our role at work each day, planting and tending a garden, singing with a choir, creating art for others to enjoy, helping a child with homework or a neighbor in need. I would venture that there are as many purposes to be discovered as there are people in this world.

Many years ago, my own search for purpose led me to Guatemala where I learned that a bottle of antibiotics aging in my medicine cabinet could save a life in a rural village. This revelation was so powerful

for me that I dedicated myself to human development efforts in that country, and have now served there for nearly 30 years. The sense of purpose I feel comes with a responsibility to others which encourages me to take care of myself so I may continue to fulfill that purpose. This includes eating a healthy diet, adhering to a regimen of regular exercise, getting enough sleep and regular health check-ups and taking supplements as needed (no matter how much I despise swallowing big pills).

If our purpose keeps us close to home, or propels us miles or even continents away, it most certainly fills our life with joy and meaning. And if the researchers' hunch about Okinawan longevity turns out to be true, embracing our purpose may also be the key to living healthier, happier and longer lives.

*Leslie Baer Dinkel is an expert in sustainable development of critically underserved communities, founder of the non-profit organization [LocalHope.org](http://LocalHope.org), and the author of the new book *Hope Dancing: Finding purpose and a place to serve among the Maya*, an intimate memoir offering tremendous insight into poverty, prejudice, the nature of self-determination, and especially, the transformational power of full-hearted giving.*

*Want to do something meaningful next vacation? Whatever your interest or talent, you can join [Local Hope](http://LocalHope.org) to help meet critical needs and fuel self-reliance for those who need it most. Go behind-the-scenes to work hand in hand with villagers in the Guatemalan highlands to improve health, education, water quality, job readiness and more for lasting, positive change. For its [profoundly enriching volunteer service experiences](#), the organization has been Top-Rated by [GreatNonProfits.org](http://GreatNonProfits.org) since 2013.*

1. Ansley Hill, RD, LD, "What is the Okinawan Diet?" April 16, 2019. Healthline.com

Image: Leslie works to ease anxiety with a little music as Mám villagers head to Local Hope's clinic where they'll be seen by a doctor—some, for the first time in their lives