

celebrate

By Navya Menon, Diversity Unit Intern

As the holiday season swings into full gear, malls and stores come alive with Christmas decorations and festive foods. But December isn't just about Christmas—it's also a time for celebrating Kwanzaa and Hanukkah, each with its own unique traditions and joyous festivities that bring people together in the spirit of unity and celebration.

Kwanzaa was created in 1966 by Professor Dr. Maulana Karenga to unify and strengthen the African-American community by celebrating and commemorating traditional African “first fruits” harvest festivals. Inspired by the Ashanti and Zulu harvest celebrations, Dr. Karenga established a week-long holiday. Each day of Kwanzaa honors one of the seven principles known as Nguzo Saba: Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith). Traditional foods eaten during Kwanzaa vary widely depending on each family's culture. Popular dishes with African roots include collard greens, jollof rice, black-eyed peas, macaroni and cheese, and candied yams.

Hanukkah, also spelled Chanukah, is an eight-day Jewish holiday with ancient roots dating back to the second century BCE. Hanukkah commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration. Beginning on Kislev 25, typically in December, the holiday represents the ideals of Judaism and involves lighting a candle each day of the festival. During the rededication of the temple, a small amount of olive oil, sufficient for only one day, miraculously kept the menorah lit for eight days, inspiring the eight-day festival. The Hanukkah menorah, or Hanukkiah, features eight candles plus a shamash, the ninth candle used to light the others. Lighting the menorah is a key tradition, along with playing the dreidel game, which has historical significance as a secret means to study the Torah when it was outlawed. Foods typically fried in oil are eaten to celebrate the miracle of the oil, including potato latkes, matzo ball soup, brisket, roasted chicken, applesauce, and kugel.

As we enjoy the festive cheer and traditions of Christmas, Kwanzaa, and Hanukkah, let's embrace the unique ways these celebrations bring us together. Whether it's through the lights of the menorah, the principles of Kwanzaa, or the joy of Christmas, each holiday offers a chance to share, include, and appreciate the diverse cultural tapestry that enriches our lives. Here's to a season of unity, understanding, and joyful celebrations for all.