

Out in the Mountains

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Kwanzaa: To Begin

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by Gilles

The word Kwanzaa means "to begin" in Swahili. In Burlington, Kwanzaa is a collective, a group of individuals best known in the area for its marvelous, up-beat drumming concerts and exhibitions. But Kwanzaa is more, much more.

Back in 1981, several women prepared a video for a UVM television course. In the making of the video they realized the need in Vermont for more exposure to Black culture. This in turn inspired a small core group to conduct workshops in the schools; these early pioneering members were Paig Wadley-Bailey, Gwen Shervington, Michiyo Fukaya, and Nari Penson.

During the early workshops, these leaders discussed Black art, music, poetry, dance, and story-telling; some members did drumming and engaged children in rhythms and dancing. At this point, a few community members began helping out so that three to six people were doing workshops at a time.

Soon, the group began broadening its perspectives to include helping children to become aware of other cultures besides their own. The women soon discovered that little kids had no difficulty with all this, being by nature, flexible and "sponges" to learning; however, older children and adult audiences had guilt reactions and resisted the education. In order to counter and try to eliminate these feelings, a gentler approach was developed to include exploring ways in which people felt different themselves and felt discriminated against or hurt; this in turn led to open discussion and deeper understanding of differences in others.

Kwanzaa feels it is important to not deal only on a cerebral level. The group uses music, art projects, films and videotapes to generate discussion, have fun and show that other ways to communicate do exist.

Originally, Kwanzaa was an educational group, doing workshops around the state, involving issues of discrimination and multi-culturalism. The original state-



ment of purpose was- and remains- the main concept of being against oppression, which includes oppression against homosexuality.

Kwanzaa now consists of two main parts, or "wings": educational and performance. So how did it develop a second "arm"? Well, let me tell you!

The groups performances were, at first, the result of open invitations to join in to drum, with 3 or 4 rehearsals before an event. Kwanzaa began to play at Vermont Lesbian and Gay Pride Celebrations, their drumming and joyful noisemaking providing spirit-raising music before the parade. Other groups, such as the Peace Coalition also asked these wonderful drummers to join in their parades. These performances were informal and workshops were still the main focus of the organization.

Around 1986, Kwanzaa began getting serious, taking lessons, and learning the background of the music (such as the country of origin, meaning and uses). They realized the need to give a political message and not be just an entertainment organiza-

tion. This led to awareness that the group could no longer just have anyone come and sit in to drum, but performers needed to show commitment, to meet and rehearse.

The educational workshops are still a focus, but more public performances are occurring now, steadily, with 10 members performing on a regular basis. Some of the individuals in the performing group also participate in the educational wing as do community resource people as needed. The organization is also listed in the Vermont Research Agents Catalog for schools as a multi-cultural resource group. An important aspect of Kwanzaa and one of the differences, not traditionally seen in many cultures, is the fact of women performing on drums. Called the "Kwanzaa Percussion Ensemble", its core function is to promote global awareness, through the use of music from various cultures: African, Diaspora (the spreading of Black people throughout the world)-which includes Afro-Asian, Afro-Cuban, Afro-American, Afro-Brazilian, etc., and mid-Eastern.

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