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Kwanzaa Celebration Set for Dec. 6 Global African Cultural Holiday Celebration at IWU

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Illinois Wesleyan's Office of Multi-Cultural Affairs and the Black Student Union will celebrate Kwanzaa--a holiday created by Maulana Karenga in 1966 and based on African traditions--on Wednesday, Dec. 6 at 7 p.m. in the Main Lounge of Memorial Student Center, 104 E. University St., Bloomington.

The celebration is free and open to the public, and focuses on family, community and culture. African storytelling and traditional Kwanzaa foods such as chicken, fish and rice also will be available.

The event will include a reggae band "Wan-Afrika featuring Kwame." In addition, Nancy J. Dawson, assistant professor of Black American Studies at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and Nancy Tolson, assistant professor of English at Illinois State University will attend the event to speak about the importance of Kwanzaa and its traditions.

Kwanzaa is not a religious celebration, but rather a chance for people to reflect at the end of the year, and look forward for the next year. It focuses on seven universal principles--unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith.

Traditionally, Kwanzaa is a seven-day celebration. Each day focuses on one principle and a candle is lit on a special candle holder, called a "kinara," to represent that principle. Kwanzaa takes place from Dec. 26-Jan. 1. However, IWU is celebrating the seven-day long holiday on Dec. 6 since students and faculty will be on winter break Dec. 26-Jan 1. For the IWU celebration, students will demonstrate the seven principles to the audience.

Kwanzaa was founded in 1966 by Maulana Karenga, who also visited IWU in 1998 for the Kwanzaa celebration. Karenga is Professor and Chair of the Department of Black Studies at California State University, Long Beach, and Executive Director of the African American Cultural Center.

Karenga is well known for his strong impact on Black intellectual and political affairs. Through his ties with various organizations, and his philosophy, Karenga has played an important role in shaping the Black Arts Movement, Black Studies, the Black Power Movement, Black Student Union Movement, Afrocentricity, the independent Black school movement, and Black theological and ethical discourse.

Karenga's ideas for Kwanzaa are found in the first harvest celebrations of Africa. The term Kwanzaa comes from the phrase "matunda ya kwanza" which means "first fruits" in Swahili, which is the most widely spoken language in Africa.

Monica Taylor, director of multi-cultural affairs at IWU and coordinator of the event, said, "I organized the celebration to educate the community about different cultures because I think it is important for people to learn about them." She added, "I also like it because Kwanzaa is not a religious celebration... everybody can celebrate it regardless of their faith."

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