

Starting a New Tradition



Shantelle Davis is a nine-year-old girl in New York. On a cold night in December, her family is standing around the kitchen table while she lights a **candle**. The table is decorated with **baskets** of fruit and vegetables and **ears of corn** for Shantelle and her two brothers.

“This candle represents *umoya*, an African word that means being together,” Shantelle says. “That’s the most important thing for a family.”

Tonight is the first night of Kwanzaa, and Shantelle is spending the holiday with her family. More than 5 million African Americans celebrate Kwanzaa every year from December 26 until January 1. It’s a time when they get together with their families to think about their history and their ancestors in Africa.

Kwanzaa is very unusual because it was started by one man. In 1966, an American named Maulana Karenga wanted a holiday for African-Americans to honor their culture and

traditions. So he used words and customs from Africa to create a new celebration. He took the name Kwanzaa from the words for “first fruits” in Swahili, an African language. At first, a few American families had small celebrations at home. Now, there are also Kwanzaa events in schools and public places, and Kwanzaa has spread to other countries like Canada and Jamaica.

The main symbol of Kwanzaa is a **candleholder** with seven candles, one for each of the principles of Kwanzaa. Each night, a family member lights one of the candles and talks about the idea it represents: being together, being yourself, helping each other, sharing, having a goal, creating, and believing. The candles are red, black, and green, the colors of Kwanzaa. The parents also pour drinks to honor family members who have died. On the last night of Kwanzaa, there is a big dinner with African food, and children receive small presents.

Today people can buy Kwanzaa greeting cards and special Kwanzaa clothes. Stores sell Kwanzaa candles and candleholders. Some people don’t believe that Kwanzaa is

a real holiday, because it’s so new. But other people say that customs and celebrations are always changing and that Kwanzaa shows what is important in people’s lives.

Shantelle Davis says she likes Kwanzaa because it’s fun. “But I also learn new things every year,” she says.

