

KWANZAA

A Cultural Holiday

By P. A. Tatum

or black Americans who can find no joy or purpose in the traditional Christmas celebration or who want to expand the observance of the Christian holiday to include an expression of their Afro-American heritage, the answer might be Kwanzaa.

Kwanzaa is a cultural, not a religious holiday. It is a weeklong celebration beginning December 26 and ending January 1. Its focus is on the family and is considered to be a cultural statement making black people more aware of their history.

This unique holiday was created in 1966 by Dr. Mulana Karenga, a California educator and scholar. Following an extensive study of traditional African societies, Dr. Karenga learned those societies revolved around seven basic principles.

The principles of Kwanzaa are Umoja — unity; Kujichagulia — self-determination; Ujima — collective work and responsibility; Ujamaa — cooperative economics; Nia — purpose; Kuumba — creativity; and Imani-faith.

Cedric McClester, a spokesman for the New York Urban Coalition which has been sponsoring Kwanzaa celebrations for the past 10 years, said the coalition is dedicated to promoting the holiday's seven principles because they serve as an effective guide of daily living.

McClester also is the author of "Kwanzaa: Everything You Always Wanted To Know But Didn't Want To Ask. He said Kwanzaa is now celebrated by about five million people nationwide.

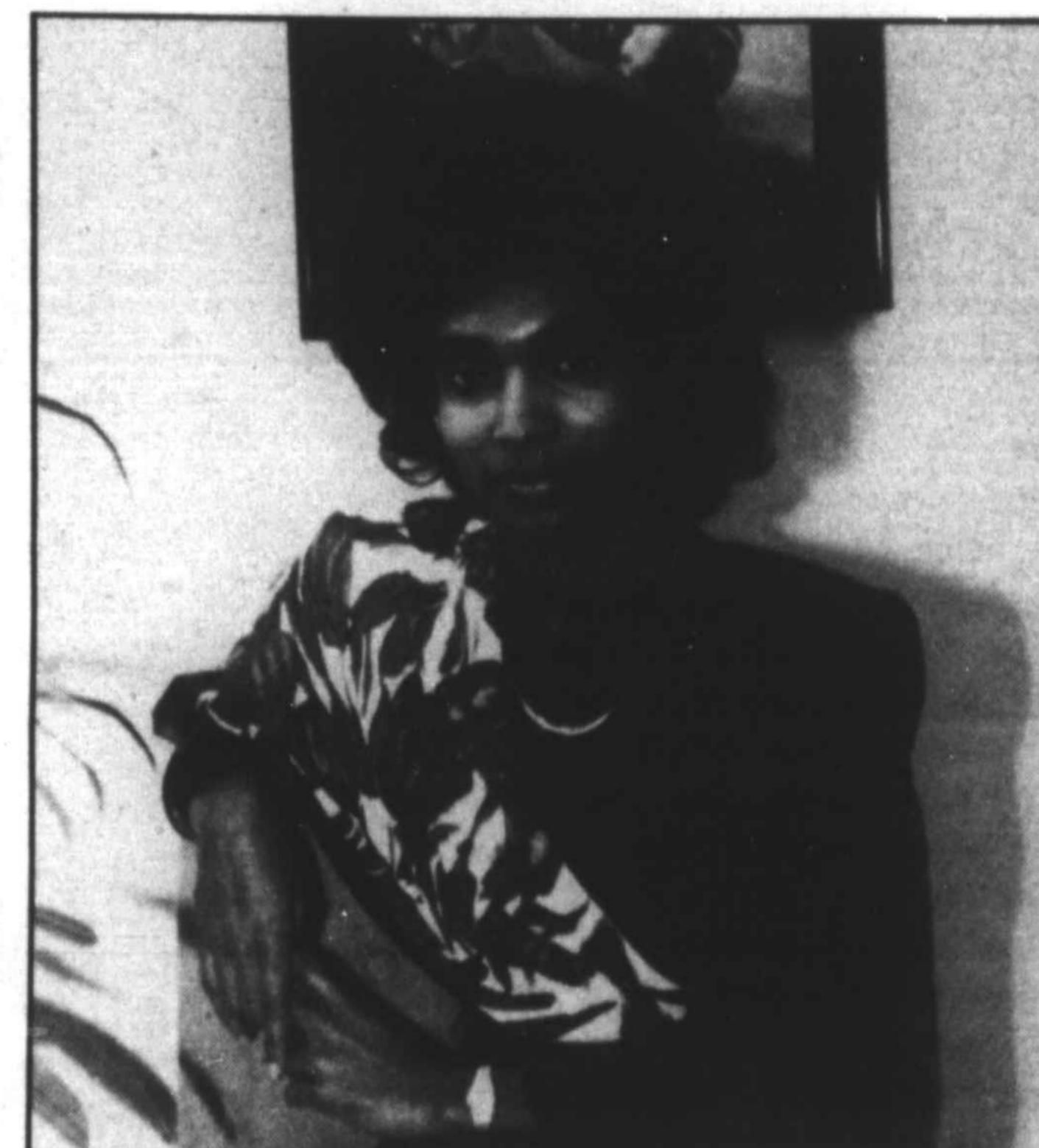
For the past five years, the coalition in conjunction with New York's American Museum of Natural History, has sponsored a three-day Kwanzaa celebration at the museum.

Ismel Calderon, a museum spokesman, said this year's celebration will feature music, dance, workshops, puppetry for children, lectures and demonstrations. Mr. Calderon said museum officials expect about 5,000 to attend the three-day event.

Kwanzaa is observed in a score of public New York locations as well as in private homes across the country. In 1984, Philadelphian Anita Cauthorn and a friend founded Kwanzaa Koncepts, a non-profit organization sponsoring workshops on its history and practice.

People celebrate Kwanzaa for a myriad of reasons. Long Island, New York resident Cynthia Franklin, 27, said her family has been celebrating Kwanzaa since 1983.

Ms. Franklin, who works as an account executive for Warner Publisher Services in New York City, said she could not celebrate Christmas in good conscience for several reasons, including her



Cynthia Franklin

belief that Christmas does not take into account the African roots of Christianity.

Her family, which includes her mother, a married older sister and a younger brother, observe a modified Kwanzaa, she said. This includes a feast, to which everyone brings a dish, and homemade or culturally relevant gifts such as books on African culture.

Ms. Franklin said the celebration usually occurs at her mother's home where they set up a Kwanzaa table on which sits symbols of the holiday: fruit to symbolize the harvest and the seven candleholders for each of Kwanzaa's seven principles. Another symbol is the straw mat. Friends also are invited in to share the celebration.

Kwanzaa is 22 years old this year and with each passing season more and more Afro-Americans celebrate it either as their only recognition of this special time of endings and beginnings, or as an addition to the traditional Christmas holiday. For many, it is the perfect expression of our unique religious and cultural backgrounds as Afro-Americans.

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