

THURSDAY, JULY 26, 2018

Courant Community

Exhibit Explores Diverse Cultures



Joan Hunt/Special to Courant Community

Left: The Kwanzaa exhibit represents the holiday founded by Dr. Maulana Karenga, which is important to African American families in remembering their heritage. The celebration includes lighting a candle from the kinara each night. Right: Michelle O'Neil Petruniw talks about the traditional Ukrainian Easter celebration and customs at the "Holidays of Wethersfield's World" exhibition opening July 10. Story, more photos, pages 6-7.

White
Wedding

*Band rocks the
park.*

PAGE 3

Real Estate

*Oxymorons
explored.*

PAGE 4

Fire
Hydrants

*Proposed law
would require
snow clearing.*

PAGE 5



Expand Your Horizons At "Holidays Of Wethersfield's World" Exhibit

Historical societies are sometimes viewed as standoffish and stuck in the past.

In Wethersfield, nothing could be farther from the truth. The members view history as a living thing that changes and grows, as new people come and add their stories to the mix.

The exhibit that opened on July 10 and runs through Aug. 10, at the Keeney Memorial Cultural Center, highlights the traditions and festivals brought to town by some of its more recent Americans.

Called "Holidays of Wethersfield's World," it is both a celebration of diversity and a generous sharing of customs, recipes, and crafts from other cultures that are becoming part of Wethersfield's ongoing history.

Michelle O'Neil Petruniw, for example, stood at a table featuring traditional items from Easter in Ukraine, from which her grandparents immigrated to this country through a German war camp. The Ukrainian holiday sometimes coincides with Easter in the United States, but more often it is two to five weeks later, because it is celebrated on the first full moon after Passover.

The mainstay of the Easter celebration, she said, is paska, an egg bread decorated with religious symbols and taken to church on Easter morning to be blessed. She explained that no meat is eaten during Lent, so the Easter meal includes things like ham, kielbasa, and eggs. All foods are prepared the day before, because nobody can work on Easter.

One of her handouts explains the art of creating pysanka eggs.

"It starts as a white canvas and you go with light colors to dark," she said.

Each layer is waxed, and when the wax is removed, it exposes all the colors.

Three Kings Day, which happens on Jan. 6, was

the subject of the table prepared by Mary Jane Bezares. She had interviewed a Wethersfield resident from Columbia, who said the children leave shoes out at night to be filled with gifts.

The holiday differs a little in most Latino countries, but Bezares said children often leave shoe boxes with gifts and a bowl of water for the camels, in anticipation of the visit by the Three Kings.

"They usually eat pork, but some families may want to have pulled pork, some fry it or bake it or cook it more like a stew," said Bezares.

Bezares had also prepared a table for the Albanian Day of Holy Water, which she said was like the Three Kings Day celebration. She interviewed Wethersfield resident Zhuljeta Hajnaj, who moved here from Albania four years ago, and learned that towns celebrate the holiday in different ways - either at a fountain, a beach, or a river.

A priest throws a blessed cross made of wood or metal into the water, and the men jump in to retrieve it. Whoever finds it goes home-to-home with the treasure, where he receives baked goods like kulac or other gifts from the lady of the house.

Kwanzaa, celebrated Dec. 26-Jan. 1, is an African holiday celebrated mostly by African Americans to pay homage to their ancestors. It is based on the Nguzo Saba (Seven Principles) of unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. One candle from the kinara, which holds three red candles, three green candles, and a black one in the middle, is lit each night of the holiday.

Easter in Calabria, Italy includes lamb and the traditional Easter bread with colored eggs. Mary Capalbo and her daughter, Teresa, stood near a colorful candy tree that was made by Mary's father-in-law. Traditionally, people hang candy and

fruit on the tree, which is blessed in church on Easter Sunday, and then the children eat the goodies when they get home.

Among the other traditions highlighted at the cultural center is a display of Nowruz, the Iranian festival of spring, which corresponds with their new year. People pay short visits to one another on that day, exchange gifts, and enjoy Persian music and foods, including wheat and lentils, samanu (a sweet pudding), dried Persian olives, apples, and sumac berries.

Another is Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. This five-day festival celebrates the triumph of light over darkness with fireworks and diya (small containers filled with earth and oil) that are lit and placed inside and outside the homes.

Wethersfield Historical Society Executive Director Amy Wittorff said the purpose of the exhibit is to not only educate and enlighten the community about the different cultures that make up the town of Wethersfield, but also to make all of them feel welcomed by the historical society.

"We want to change the perception that history is only about white people from 400 years ago," she said.

"Jessica Dean, our educator and exhibition coordinator, did an awful lot of work to coordinate things," said Wittorff. "We gave her a venue and framework for the different people to tell their own stories."

The result is amazing.

It is a collaboration between People Empowering People UConn Extension Program, the Wethersfield Historical Society, Wethersfield Early Childhood Collaborative, and Time to Talk at the Wethersfield Library, with support from the Robert Allen Keeney Memorial Fund at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving.

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT



Easter in Calabria, Italy is represented by a colorful candy tree and other artifacts from the family of Mary Capalbo and her daughter, Teresa.



Educator and Exhibition Coordinator Jessica Dean (front) enjoys the result of everyone's labors, on opening day of the "Holidays of Wethersfield's World" exhibit.



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The Zaer family prepared a table to represent Nowruz, the Iranian festival of spring, which also celebrates their new year.



Diwali is the Hindu Festival of Lights that celebrates the triumph of light over darkness with fireworks and the placement of diya lights inside and outside the home.