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Head librarian Tracey Jones explains the traditions of Kwanzaa to a group of 20 parents and children at Halifax's North Branch Library,

Kwanzaa celebrates black culture during aftermath of Christmas

By CAROL JOHNSTONE

On Boxing Day, you won't find the Lucas-Young family duking it out at the mall exchanging gifts.

They'll be home celebrating the first day of Kwanzaa, a seven-day holiday celebrating black culture, community and family,

Cindy Lucas and her family stopped celebrating Christmas two years ago because "it just got to a point where, going into stores shopping and seeing all these people in there just beating one another for this, that and the other thing (was too much),"

"It's not something we want to do anymore," Ms. Lucas said. The holiday season shouldn't be "about getting. It's about being together as a family."

Ms. Lucas's husband, John Young, first heard about Kwanzaa from the media, and "that's what we were gearing towards, more of an Afro-centric holiday,"

Black educator Maulana Karenga developed the Kwanzaa holiday nearly 30 years ago in the wake of the Watts riots in Los Angeles as a way to build up the black community spiritually.

To learn more about Kwanzaa, the Lucas-Young family joined about 15 other parents and children at Halifax's North Branch Library recently to hear Joan Jones, a metro area human rights activist, and her daughter, head librarian Tracey, speak about the festival.

Kwanzaa means first fruit or first harvest, making the holiday something of a thanksgiving-type celebration.

Tracey Jones described the process of building up a Kwanzaa table, beginning with a beautiful red, yellow, green and black African-patterned cloth.

Next comes a makika, or straw placemat. A brass, seven-cupped candelabra is placed on the mat. Three red candles rise to one black

one in the centre, with three green candles descending the other side.

"The red is for the blood (symbolizing the struggle for freedom), the green is for Africa or the land, and the black is for the people, African people," said Joan Jones.

Each day, after lighting a candle, a "unity" cup is passed around the gathering.

Children can also make gifts to hand up to their elders, who can then hand down heirlooms to the children. Handmade gifts, or songs and poems, are preferred over expensive store-bought items.

But Kwanzaa's not all ceremony, nor is it meant to supplant other religious celebrations, Joan Jones said.

"There's Christmas, then there's this whole other week of a little bit of spiritual, a whole lot of fun, and family and friends, and party.

"It is also not ... an exclusively African-Canadian gathering," she said. 'It's for family and friends.'"