

SPEAKER: It was 26 years ago this month when then-teacher Titilayo Bediako first introduced her sixth grade students to Kwanzaa. The experience led her to make the move from classroom teacher to leader celebrating Kwanzaa for an entire community. What is it about this week-long holiday celebrating African-American heritage that made Titilayo make such a dramatic life transformation? Well, our producer Ellen Finn asked her.

ELLEN FINN: Titilayo, thank you so much for being here.

TITILAYO Thank you for having me.

BEDIAKO:

ELLEN FINN: So I understand you were a sixth grade teacher at Lyndale Community School in Minneapolis. What made you decide to bring Kwanzaa into the classroom?

TITILAYO I knew that it was very important for children to understand the contributions that African-Americans had made to the United States and to the world. And I came into a classroom that was equally divided between children of African, Asian, white children and Latino children. And I had not had any relationship with, actually, Asian people at all because they didn't live in my neighborhood or anything. And so when I introduced myself to my students, I told my Asian students that I knew very little about them. But what I did know about was me. So that if they taught me about them, that I would teach them about who I was. And I had primarily Laotian and Cambodian and Vietnamese children that were in my classroom.

My students were so excited that they started bringing me all these books about their history, and about their cultures, and about their traditions. And so I, in turn, taught my whole classroom about Kwanzaa, this African-American holiday that is based on universal principles, which are unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, Nia, creativity, and faith.

So our Kwanzaa celebration at Lyndale, it started out as my class who did a presentation in front of two other classes. And from that, the children loved Kwanzaa so much that, first, it turned into a school-wide celebration, and then it was actually a district-wide celebration.

ELLEN FINN: Wow. So I assume, at that point, you were already celebrating Kwanzaa yourself.

TITILAYO Yes. I have two children of my own. And my children were little, and I wanted them to celebrate a holiday that helped them, one, in terms of learning about the greatness of their own history and their own culture, and that something that could give them a pride in terms of who they were as African-Americans.

ELLEN FINN: When you were first introducing Kwanzaa to your students, how did you describe it to them? How did you introduce the celebration?

TITILAYO I'll tell you, one thing about young people is that young people love to learn about things that other people don't know. And the language of Kwanzaa is Swahili. And so I started out telling them that I was going to teach them this new language. And we went from that to what Kwanzaa was, that it was a African-American holiday, and that it was celebrated from December 26 to January 1, and that it was a time to come together in terms of family, and culture, and celebrating the best of Black people. And the children would write something, and then they would draw a picture. And then at the end, they had a book about Kwanzaa.

ELLEN FINN: Wow. This is making me wish I had learned about Kwanzaa when I was in the sixth grade. I know that the recognition of Kwanzaa began in 1966 in the US, but I don't know much more about the history of the celebration. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

TITILAYO
BEDIAKO: So Kwanzaa started from a professor at the University of California named Maulana Karenga, who was a Black activist. And he wanted a celebration that actually celebrated the greatness of Black people. It was all about creating a holiday that wasn't based on having to buy presents, but that if you did buy presents, that it started on the 26th of December, which is when the prices of toys and everything else go down 50%, which made it more doable for community to buy presents for their children if they wanted to.

But secondly, the emphasis, in terms of presents at Kwanzaa, are about making the gifts for families, and giving very practical gifts. So there's a particular day that you give out the gifts to children, and there's a whole celebration where everybody comes together and brings food, and we celebrate with music and songs. And we talk about our history, but we also talk about our successes, and the accomplishments that we've made throughout the year, and what we want to succeed in within the next year.

ELLEN FINN: Mm. You kind of said Kwanzaa-- it's an act of Kwanzaa. It's not just that period of time. How do you live out those values in your life?

TITILAYO
BEDIAKO: Well, we know that school systems are struggling in terms of helping African-American children be successful. And oftentimes, the focus to Black children is in terms of their deficit rather than their successes. So what WE WIN does first is we build in terms of what children do well first. And then we build to help them in terms of making their weaknesses their strengths. We use the principles, and the principles of Kwanzaa are called the Nguzo Saba, which means Seven Principles. So the principles, again, unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith.

So what you'll see with WE WIN Wednesday at our Kwanzaa celebration is you'll see Black children taking the leadership in terms of teaching the community about Kwanzaa, and why it is important to them. They do it through spoken words. They do it through dance. They do it through drumming.

ELLEN FINN: Yeah, I want to hear more about that celebration. When is it? And also, I hear there's a theme.

TITILAYO
BEDIAKO: Yes, yes, yes. So Kwanzaa is Wednesday, December 14 at North High School, 1500 James Avenue North. And it's from 6 to 8 PM, door 18. And there's a parking lot on James Avenue where people can park. And we're doing it in the auditorium, and it's just going to be magnificent. And our theme is we wear the crown. And all of our children that are performing will be wearing their crowns, and they'll explain to the community about their own greatness and why they're wearing the crown. And they'll tell you in the context of Kwanzaa.

ELLEN FINN: Well, sounds like a wonderful event. Just have a minute left here, and I'm really curious if you ever hear from your students that you had way back in the '90s when you first started teaching about Kwanzaa. Has Kwanzaa become a part of their family traditions?

TITILAYO
BEDIAKO: Absolutely. Social media has made it very easy for students to get in touch with me. And it's amazing how many students I hear from-- I have some students that have sent me pictures in terms of them doing it with their family. I heard from a student, and she sent me a picture of her children, so it's very gratifying. And she was a white student.

ELLEN FINN: Well, I'll leave it right there. Thank you so much for the conversation. I really appreciate it.

TITILAYO Perfect.

BEDIAKO:

ELLEN FINN: Titilayo Bediako is the founder and executive director of the WE WIN Institute, which this year will be celebrating its 26th Kwanzaa festival at North High School on Wednesday, December 14. The event is free, and you can find out more at we-win.org.

SPEAKER: Mm. Nice job there. That's producer Ellen Finn. Now, in addition to the Kwanzaa celebration at North High in Minneapolis, Kwanzaa, as you know, is celebrated worldwide from December 26 through January the 1st.