First Day of Kwanzaa calls for reflections on unity

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SALT LAKE CITY — Today marks the first day of Kwanzaa, which celebrates African culture and history here in the United States.

Created in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga, the seven-day holiday calls for the African American community to celebrate and reflect on their history and reconnect with their African roots.

"Kwanzaa is a cultural celebration that starts the day after Christmas, and was founded by Dr. Karenga in an effort to provide a cultural and historical context to this time of celebration," said Betty Sawyer, the Executive Director for the Project Success Coalition. "Looking at moving away from the commercialization of Christmas to use this as a time to reflect on who we are as a people, where we come from, and those things that have kept us, to this day, strong."

Each day of the holiday is dedicated to one the Nguzo Saba, or Seven Principles. Each principle holds significant meaning in terms of building a sustaining community and working towards future progress and success. The first day's principle is Umoja, which means Unity in Swahili.

"As a family, we will celebrate the first day today, and with the grandchildren especially, we go around and talk about what unity means to them, and along with that, what they can do to promote unity in the family, unity in the community, and even among themselves as siblings," said Sawyer. "This is an opportunity for them to think about what they do each and every day and how that builds a sense of family unity."

Sawyer views the holiday as an opportunity for people to come together and promote understanding in the community in the wake of the stresses brought about by the past year.

"This has been a very challenging year for all of us," said Sawyer. "if we didn't roll up our sleeves and work together, and look after our neighbor and others to make sure we're all okay, things would be a lot worse than they are now... that's the message that we hope to put forward, and we hope people embrace that spirit of collective work and responsibility."

As for how one can celebrate Kwanzaa with their own family, it doesn't take much.

"it's something that can be as simple or as intricate as you want to make it," said Sawyer. "I would encourage folk to just start where they are with just some of the basics, even with the lighting ceremony, and just do a principle each night, or if you miss a night, double up and do two on one particular night, whatever your schedule affords you the opportunity to do."

The Project Success Coalition will be holding a Kwanzaa event Monday evening at the Second Baptist Church, located at 227 27th St in Ogden. It is open to public and will feature cultural presentations in partnership with the Nubian Storytellers of Utah where participants can learn more about traditional African art, music, storytelling, and cuisine.

You can learn more about the Project Success Coalition by visiting their website here.