Happy Kwanzaa!

In this special holiday edition, the creative team at The Englewood Call wanted to embody the principles of Kwanzaa. With the hustle and bustle of the holidays and the biting cold of winter, it is often difficult to stop and enjoy the holiday season. The team wanted to remind the community of the true meaning of Christmas, acknowledge the ties that bind us as a community, and reflect on the past year. After all of our meetings and brainstorming, we soon realized that we were reinventing the wheel! That is precisely the purpose of Kwanzaa.

Kwanzaa was created by Maulana Karenga, professor of Africana Studies in 1966. Kwanzaa is derived from Swahili, meaning “first fruits,” and is a week-long celebration after Christmas and before the New Year. Dr. Karenga states that Kwanzaa was created to celebrate the history and heritage of the Black community in the spirit of the seven principles, celebrated on each day. Although critiques bash the holiday as being a “fake” tradition, Kwanzaa continues to be celebrated by millions of African Americans and has spread across the world.

We hope that this edition of The Call will remind us all of the true meanings of this holiday season.

Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture, by Dr. Maulana Karenga

Both books are available at your local Chicago Public Library

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As we acknowledge the seven principles of Kwanzaa, The Call is proud to report how the principle Umoja (unity) is being practiced amongst Englewood residents who have been impacted by the Norfolk Southern land grab.

Norfolk Southern (NS) has been purchasing homes in Englewood around the boundaries of Garfield Boulevard to 61st, and from Stewart to Wallace for the past 3 years in order to build a 84 acre freight yard. Homeowners report that the billion dollar company has threatened to use eminent domain as a scare tactic to get people to sell their homes, often for much less than what they are worth.

Norfolk Southern’s plans and activities were not disclosed to the community until September 2011, when Alderman Pat Dowell (3rd) and Alderman Willie Cochran (20th) demanded that NS formally announce their plans to the community.

Norfolk Southern’s aggressive tactics to grab this land for cheap is a slap in the face to the residents of Englewood. While so many are fighting to save this community, outsiders are taking advantage of the neighborhood. However, the residents of Englewood are not backing down and have banded together in the spirit of Umoja to assure they are not disrespected and taken advantage of by Norfolk’s abuses.

“Umoja speaks to the need to develop and sustain a sense of oneness, righteous and rightful togetherness and it urges us to practice a principled and peaceful togetherness rooted in mutual respect, justice, care and concern; security of person; and equitably shared goods,” states the founder of Kwanzaa, Dr. Karenga. The residents of Englewood have exemplified all facets of this principle while dealing with Norfolk and have been unified for over a year. The residents formed an official alliance, named the Englewood Railway Coalition and are continuing to work towards justice for all the residents in this impacted area.

With the leadership of a Steven Rogers, a former Englewood resident and prominent professor at Harvard School of Business, the coalition is making great strides. The unity and mutual respect this coalition has for one another in order to seek justice speaks volumes of how others in and outside of Englewood can practice Umoja, not only in celebration of Kwanzaa but all year around.
I’ll never forget my Aunt’s voice one dawning of Christmas a few years ago. She was crying over the news that her roof had a leak and she would need to come up with a couple of hundred dollars for the repair. This kind of news seemed to be popping up in various spurts throughout the year, devastating her more and more each time. The sunlight was leaking. The car needed a new something or other. The basement flooded a few months ago.

My Aunt is the type of person who prides herself very severely on appearance. However, over the past few years her home upgrades and upkeep began to dwindle. “And now they are saying it will need something called a patch and repair...”

There was a long pause and then a heave of sobbing. “What am I doing wrong!” She waited through a tired exhale. She had no parachute, no “emergency funds.”

As I drive through Englewood, I see this look on the faces of many. They are deprivation and living in fear. Never 40 years ago. She was crying over the one dawning of Christmas a few years ago. She was crying over the previous path as if I was a fly possessing them. Then they continue on their way of thinking. Most people nod and think little of it. However, what I propose is so simple, yet requires a tremendous shift in our current state of “barely making it.” (The American Dream) and their link between the “just in the moment” and the “long term.” My Aunt has a master closet full of clothes. Most of which she doesn’t wear. These clothes often age rapidly or fade in the wash. Some she can fit, some she cannot fit any longer. Some are mummified in plastic wrap. Some are hung like closet jewelry for viewing pleasure only. These clothes at times help my Aunt maintain an “appearance” of “having it all together.” These clothes keep her from having the one thing she’s always wanted: financial freedom.

As I drive through Englewood, I see this look on the faces of many. Waiting for the bus, standing in line at Currency Exchanges or at the grocery store. There is a fear deep within the stare that seems to say How much longer can I keep this going?

I wanted so badly to help my Aunt that day. I have, several times, given her advice or suggested books that can help with her financial woes. She often blew them off. She didn’t have time to address her problem because she was too busy being neck-deep in it.

Although I was prepared to answer her question, I didn’t think she was prepared to receive it. My Aunt not only suffered from bad shopping habits, but she also suffered from a highly inaccurate state of mind – which she was solidly set in. That state of mind is what many people share: The only way to survive in this world is to try to get a decent education, work for money and then try to save up enough money to retire. Rarely do people seek the missing link between the “just in the distance” level of financial comfort (The American Dream) and their current state of “barely making it.”

What I propose is so simple, yet requires a tremendous shift in our way of thinking. Most people nod their heads vacantly like they hear words but do not really register them. Then they continue on their previous path as if I was a fly buzzing in their ear that was successfully swatted away.

Yet, when I heeded this advice just seven years ago, I was able to build a substantial amount of wealth in a short amount of time and I can see myself steadily walking toward that financial freedom. I am no longer in the maze. I am walking out. Here’s what I wish my Aunt would have understood that day:

“Here’s what you are doing wrong. You are only working for your money. You work for money and then you spend yourself into debt.” That’s it.

Telling people these days to stop buying things they can’t afford is like telling a mouse to not eat cheese. Yet, that is one of the heft powers behind the poverty cycle. Understanding the difference between what to buy and what not to buy is the other.

So this holiday season as the world of liabilities calls out to you to buy-buy-buy, ask yourself: What am I really buying here? How long will this purchase serve me? Will this purchase give back to me? Take a look around your home and see what items you have purchased that stand the test of time. If these items are not giving back to you, they are liabilities and will only drag you further away from financial freedom. Do yourself a favor this Christmas. Make gifts from things you find in nature. This costs nothing but your time and energy. (And if they don’t appreciate your effort, then maybe you need to re-evaluate that relationship, too!)

Then take all the money you would have spent on Christmas liabilities and put them into something that will generate more wealth for you. Do this over and over and you will be well on your way to financial freedom. THAT is the gift that keeps on giving.

The Vigil For True Justice is a bi-annual movement dedicated to guiding spending away from the cycle of poverty as it relates to the prison industrial complex and moving support to investing in community growth and wealth. Find out more at: www.VigilForTrueJustice.org