

STATE & LOCAL

Holiday Traditions Spread Culture Caitlin Griffin, Staff Writer

Early this month, local college students, staff, and faculty will be headed home to celebrate the winter holidays. Since the diverse Meredith community recognizes various seasonal occasions, *The Herald* sought to interview one student, Spenser Taub, and one professor, Dr. Alisa Johnson, about their personal holiday traditions and festivities.

Hanukkah

Spenser Taub is a senior Jewish student who celebrates Hanukkah every year with her family. When asked to elaborate on the history of Hanukkah, she explained, "When the Maccabees succeeded against the evil King and restored the temple, they discovered that they had enough oil to light the temple for only one day and one night. In a grand miracle, however, the oil lasted a whopping eight days and eight nights. So we celebrate that miracle symbolically by lighting a candle with the shamish (the center and highest candle on the menorah) each night for eight nights and by waiting for all of the candles to burn down."

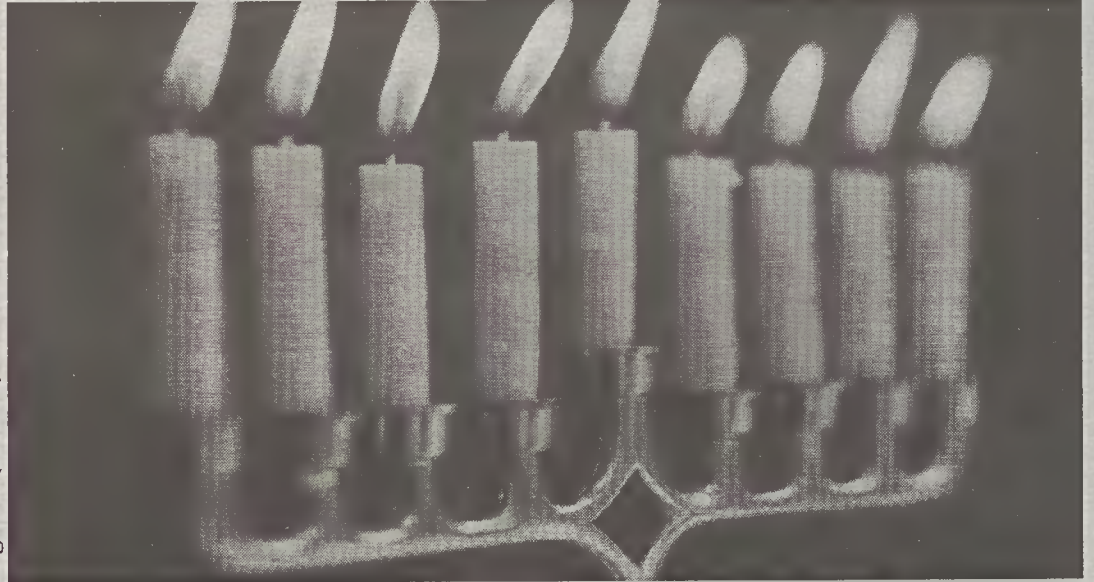
Spenser claimed that she and her father are the primary ones responsible for leading the Hanukkah traditions in her family. "We perform the ceremony of lighting the candles and saying a prayer together, and each night we read a different story about Hanukkah," she said. Generally when the father is absent from the home over

the holidays, the responsibility of upholding the familiar Hanukkah prayers and festivities is left to the eldest child instead of the spouse. When the *Herald* inquired about informal Hanukkah practices in Spenser's own family, she stated "We traditionally choose one of the eight nights as our 'party night' to which we invite all of our friends. Then we have a huge meal of oily foods that we'll spend the entire year trying to work off!"

This year, Hanukkah will occur December 1-9.

Winter Solstice

One other winter holiday that some Meredith students may find unfamiliar is the Winter Solstice, which Dr. Alisa Johnson has celebrated along with Kwanzaa and Christmas for the past decade. "I love to celebrate holidays, and I am always looking for new ones to incorporate," Dr. Johnson claimed upon being solicited for an interview about her winter traditions by the *Herald*. On the morning of the eve of the Winter Solstice, she decorates her house with white candles and sprigs of holly and evergreens in preparation for her annual Solstice party. In addition, she spends the day making



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The *Meredith Herald* is published by the College throughout the academic year. The paper is funded by the College and through independent advertising. All advertisements should be sent to heraldadvertising@email.meredith.edu.

The opinions expressed in the editorial columns do not necessarily reflect those of the College administration, faculty, or student body.

The policy of this paper requires that submissions be made by 5 p.m. the Thursday before publication and that contributors sign all submissions and provide necessary contact information. The editor and staff welcome submissions meeting the above guidelines.

Mission Statement:

The staff of The *Meredith Herald* is committed to representing our diverse community by publicizing local events, by addressing controversy, by cultivating civic engagement and by empowering women.

Published by Hinton Press

wassail and a Yule log cake and ordering spicy Thai food. Dr. Johnson explained, "Because winter arrives on the shortest day and the longest night, we keep our focus on the sun, which is why we eat hot food. At dusk we light the candles and our guests arrive. Once we have all gathered, we have a brief ceremony during which we take turns reading about the importance of the sun to humankind and the gifts of the seasons. We read poetry and share stories, and then we drink a toast with the wassail. After our toast we have a brief period of quiet meditation, and then we plant our light garden." According to Dr. Johnson, the light garden is a large pan filled with white sand into which small white candles are placed in rows. During the meditation period, it is customary to reflect on the year that is passing and the year that is to come. She elaborates, "We each write down five things we wish to see grow in our lives in the coming year on small strips of paper and ball them up into tiny seeds. We plant the seeds in the sand beneath the candles, and when every seed is planted, we light all of the candles and watch them burn down. At midnight, we blow

out all of the candles except the one that will burn until dawn."

When *The Herald* inquired about the significance of the light garden seeds, Dr. Johnson replied, "I harvest the seeds from the sand the next morning. I hold on to them until around February, when I take them out and plant them in my garden. Each spring as things begin to bloom around me, I reflect on the fact that my garden is filled with the hopes and dreams of the people I love."

The 2010 Winter Solstice will occur on December 21.

Care to share your local traditions in a future *Herald* article? Email us at herald@email.meredith.edu