

An array of holidays

Story by: Frankie Calabrese-Barton & Holyn Walsh

With a diverse student body comes an array of holidays celebrated. While a majority of students celebrate Christmas at the high school, students who honor other traditions over break are often overlooked. The holidays represent a variety of things for a variety of people: light, family, prosperity. In this compilation of stories, we tried to highlight students' traditions we found that are unique.



Malek Awde bites into his mother's famous coconut cookies that she bakes every holiday season.

Malek Awde Secular Christmas

For some students, the holidays are more about spending time with family, rather than celebrating a religious holiday.

This is the case for Malek Awde (9) who is Muslim, but celebrates Christmas traditions with his family over winter break. When Awde envisions winter break, he sees himself spending time with his family, sitting on the couch in their living room. They eat

his mother's special cookies that she makes every holiday season and watch Christmas movies. When picking a movie to watch, Awde usually chooses "Elf"

"My mom always makes a really nice dessert," Awde said. "Usually, it's her coconut cookies which is a nice tradition."

Awde and his family view doing Christmas traditions as something that brings

them together as a family, rather than something with religious value. They put up a Christmas tree and exchange gifts, but they don't celebrate the birth of Christ.

"We do it for the sake of it being just a regular holiday, like more of a national holiday than a religious one," Awde said. "It's like Memorial Day."

Alexies Pena Christmas

Alexies Pena (9) used to live right next to many of her family members. Her grandma was across the street. Her cousins were just around the corner.

That was until around two years ago, when Pena and her immediate family moved to another neighborhood, ten minutes away. To keep their connection, Pena's grandma came up with a new annual tradition: making tamales every holiday season.

Tamales are a traditional Mexican dish that are made of a dough mixture and filled with meat, beans and cheese. Pena's grandmother is very experienced in making tamales, and she often tends to take matters

into her own hands while they're cooking.

"When we make them, my grandma yells at us like 'you're doing this wrong, let me do it,'" Pena said. "If she wants something done right, she'll just do it herself"

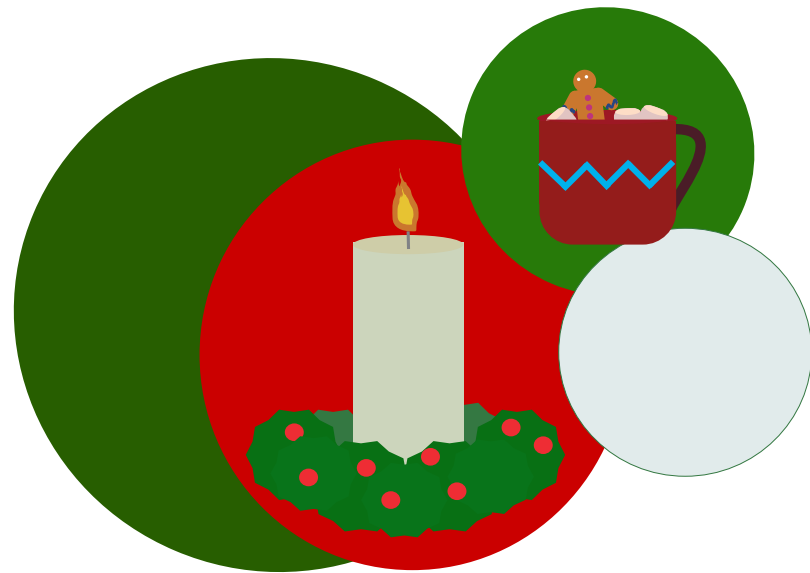
Pena's favorite memory of making the tamales is when she accidentally burned her hand on the oil they were using to fry the tamales, and her grandmother was there to take care of her.

"My grandma got me a wet towel to put on my arm and sat me down and made me some horchata which is pretty much milk and cinnamon," Pena said.

Other than the tamales, her family makes other holiday dishes like her grandma's cheesecake and a traditional soup, Menudo, that's a deep red color and contains hearty ingredients like meat, carrots and potatoes.

Before they sit down to eat, they take the time to appreciate being together to celebrate and have dinner.

"We'll do a little prayer in Spanish, where we say thank you god for this meal, thank you for blessing this family, and thank you that all family members can be here," Pena said.



Clara Craig

Clara Craig (9) gets to celebrate Christmas not once, but twice.

Craig's mother's side of her family is Ukrainian. In addition to celebrating a regular Christmas day with her father's side of the family, she gets together with all of her extended family at her great aunt's house in Alberta, Canada for Ukrainian Orthodox Christmas on Jan. 7. Ukrainian Orthodox Christmas is on a different day because their church uses the

Julian calendar.

To Craig, the celebration just feels like 30 of her family members crammed into a basement eating dinner. Because it is. Yet, she enjoys seeing all of her family and eating foods that she wouldn't normally eat.

"I have, like, nine aunts and great aunts. They all get together and cook us a huge meal," Craig said.

The meal includes dishes such as fish, bread and other traditional

Ukrainian foods.

"We always eat a lot of this one soup, made out of beets," Craig said. "It's called borscht. I do not like borscht."

Craig's grandma is Ukrainian, and her and her siblings brought these traditions to Canada with her when she immigrated.

"I love seeing my family and getting to honor our culture," Craig said.



Before sitting down to eat, the Craig family talks amongst themselves and catches up. A feast of beets, bread, and fish awaits them.

Bangsheng Lu Lunar New Year

What stands out most to Bangsheng Lu's (11) during the Lunar New Year holiday with his family is the happiness and warmth that the celebration radiates.

Lu's family moved to East Lansing from Guangdong Province, China, when he was three years old. They had almost nothing, and spoke no English. His parents had minimum wage jobs in a restaurant.

"It was pretty scary at first, because I didn't know what was going on," Lu said. "We came from another country, and we were just trying to get on our feet."

Throughout Lu's life he has seen that turn around. His mother attended MSU and is now a professor in physics there. His father still works in

the restaurant.

Though Lunar New Year falls in late January to early February, Lu's family moves the celebration to over winter break, so they have the opportunity to celebrate and have family over.

The celebration is extended over multiple days. First, they have the "pre-celebration," as Lu calls it, where they do the Buddhist tradition of bowing to the god Buddha. The next day, Lu's extended family comes over for a big celebration. They cook food at their house, and exchange red envelopes with money inside, usually around \$20. The envelopes are called *hóngbao*, and are a traditional gift given at the Lunar New Year that symbolize good luck and prosperity in the coming year. Families celebrate

together, hanging out late into the night and go to bed around 5 a.m. before going home the next morning.

"My family is kinda loving, and they also like to gossip about their kids. You're like, 'My kid went to nursing school.' But it's in a loving way."

Most of Lu's extended family lives in China, so he enjoys seeing the family members he can. Some of them recently immigrated from China, just four years ago.

"[Some of my family is] pretty new here, so it's nice to see them. We also help them out, help get them off the ground. Just like we needed."

All of the food, gifts, and laughter are what really define the celebration



Bangsheng Lu opens *hóngbao*, a red envelope traditionally gifted with money inside at Lunar New Year. Photo by: Quinn Martin

as the family rings in the new year.

"It's just such a happy vibe," Lu said. "It's unlike anything else."

Raphael Gold Hanukkah

To many, the terms "winter break" and "Christmas break" are interchangeable. However, not everyone celebrates Christmas, so the latter can be hurtful and diminish the importance of other holidays.

Raphael Gold (12) lives through this every holiday season. His family celebrates Hanukkah.

"It sometimes bugs me when people forget that [Hanukkah] is happening, or call winter break 'Christmas break,'" Gold said. "But I get that winter break can't always be for Hanukkah, since the dates are inconsistent."

Because the dates of Hanukkah are determined by the Jewish lunar calendar, the eight-night long celebration can fall any day in and

around the month of December. This means that the Gold family's holiday looks different year to year.

"When Hanukkah falls on break, I get excited because we get to travel and see my extended family," Gold said. "Both of my parents are Jewish so we alternate between my mom's family and my dad's family."

This year, Hanukkah is on Dec. 18 through Dec. 26, which is during winter break, so Gold will be visiting his father's side of the family in New Jersey.

When visiting family, there are plenty of festivities. Gold enjoys his Grandma's big feasts, with traditional foods such as *latkes*, which are a type of potato

pancake. After sunset, they say prayers, play dreidel and exchange presents. They also light one candle a night on the Menorah, a nine-branched candlestick that symbolizes eternal light.

When Hanukkah doesn't fall on winter break, the Gold family still celebrates in the evenings after school and work. Gold values Hanukkah because the traditions are what make it special for him. They still manage to have a family dinner every night, and light the Menorah.

"It's not always about the traditional foods, but more just eating dinner with my family and spending time together," Gold said.



Posing with the menorah, Raphael Gold, his sister and father smile after lighting a candle on the third night of Hanukkah in 2020.

Bracy McClanahan Adoption Day

When the holidays roll around for Bracy McClanahan (12), there's a lot more to celebrate than Christmas and New Years. Every December, McClanahan celebrates the anniversary of what she would consider the most important day of her life: her adoption day.

McClanahan spent the first six years of her life in the foster care system, and living part-time with her mother and grandmother. She finally

moved in with her now-family in July of 2012, but she vividly remembers the day she was officially adopted: Dec. 19 of that year.

"I never really knew what was going on, or how the [foster-care] process worked. It was really hard because I still had connections to my siblings and cousins from the family I was taken out of," McClanahan said. "But I do remember the day they told me I was going to be adopted. It's a pretty

good feeling, like, wow. New family."

That was 10 years ago. Every year on the anniversary, McClanahan and her adoptive family have a tradition of having a special dinner that night.

"[It's a special day because] it's the one night a year that we all have a family dinner," McClanahan said. "I get flowers, and we all share memories from the past years. It's almost like a second birthday."



Bracy McClanahan (12) is surrounded by her family on her adoption day. Back row: Euan McClanahan, Patrick McClanahan, Amanda McClanahan Front Row: Ireland McClanahan, Bracy McClanahan