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STORYTELLERS PLAY ONE OF MANY KEY ROLES IN KWANZAA CELEBRATION

Nevy Wilson, Herald Staff Writer

Beneath a tent a group of children circled around Uwezo Sudan and listened closely to his booming voice. Dressed in a yellow-green-and-purple striped frock and a yellow cap, Sudan, a professional storyteller, used his arms, hands, face and voice to tell the growing group a parable about learning from one's elders.

After they giggled and jumped to the sounds of Sudan pretending to be different characters in the story --- from the gravelly voice of an old woman to the fearful cries of children --- he left them with a lesson.

"Listening to adults you can learn a lot of things. You can learn to make money. You can sometimes learn to make friends," Sudan said. "But there is nothing more important than learning to listen."

Sudan, who calls himself a griot or jali, a person who is "the walking embodiment of a community's history," says storytelling is just one of many ways to celebrate the tradition known as Kwanzaa.

Sudan, the Kuumba Dancers, the Alvin Little Jazz Band and the Westcoast Troupe were among the entertainers who performed at Saturday's Kwanzaa celebration at Bradenton's Rev. C. D. Lazier Park.

Sponsored by Neighborhood Leadership Initiative, The Front Porch Florida Council, Friends of the East Bradenton Library and Tropicana, the event marked the community-wide celebration of Kwanzaa, a seven-day holiday that started Thursday. Founded by California State University professor and activist Maulana Karenga in 1966, the holiday has its roots in the harvest celebrations that began early in African history, according to **Cynthia Newell**, president and founder of Neighborhood Leadership Initiative.

"Kwanzaa means first fruits and our children are our first fruits, they are our harvest for the future, so the focus of this celebration is on family, community and culture," **Newell** said.

On stage Saturday afternoon, three drummers pounded out a rhythmic beat as a line of women dressed in colorful ethnic outfits and headpieces danced before a crowd of children. Three-year-old Miclayne Powell was too small to join the line of dancing children, but he watched their movements closely as he was perched on his father's arm.

"In these times we need the love and support of the family and community," said Robert Powell, the child's father. "I just hope that from being here he learns to have a strong sense of love for his family and his community."

The last couple of years, the Kwanzaa celebration has been confined to the Boys and Girls Club of Bradenton and local churches. But **Newell** said she hoped bringing the event to a centrally located community park would "broaden our scope and allow us to reach the whole community."

PHOTOS/PAUL GONZALEZ VIDELA/The Herald

Garrison Viljean, 7, weaves a paper "mkeka," or placemat, from strips of construction paper with the help of sculptor George Gadson, left, who drove in from Fort Lauderdale to help out with a Kwanzaa celebration Saturday at Lazier Field in east Bradenton. Looking on is Dorothy Lockley, at right. Drummer Maceo beats out a rhythm during a Kwanzaa celebration Saturday morning at Lazier Field in east Bradenton.