

Group helps women find empowerment through nature, goddesses

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The holiday triumvirate of Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa dominate December, leaving the winter solstice — which occurred Monday — as just another day to cross off the calendar. But for a group of East Bay women, the official start of winter and the longest night of the year was a time for prayer, song, dance and reflection.

"The days are short and the nights are long, so that's symbolic of a very introspective time and contemplative (time), although it's also the return of the sun," said Leilani Birely, a Lafayette resident who is the leader, or high priestess, of Daughters of the Goddess, a religious group in the Wiccan and pagan traditions.

The group is Dianic, focusing solely on female goddesses from all cultures worldwide. Members refer to that collection of goddesses as the singular "goddess."

The goal, Birely said, is to educate the public about the goddess, help women empower themselves and, most of all, promote a celebration of and reverence for nature.

"In all cultures throughout time and history, the Earth has always been referred to in some way as 'mother' or 'she,' " Birely said.

While the Daughters of the Goddess brings community, it also draws misunderstanding. Members must deal with the disapproval of people who misunderstand its traditions, are uncomfortable with them or condemn them.

"The pagan path, and especially when you get into the sacred feminine, is not looked upon really well, and actually a lot of people are very afraid of that," Concord resident Patrice Erickson said.

Helping others understand, she said, can help change attitudes.

"We celebrate the Earth and all of her children, so the thought of 'We're out there doing evil or bad things' is not even part of the picture," Erickson said.

Beside seasonal celebrations like solstice, the women gather for prayer circles, retreats and a yearly spiral dance. Women of all ages are welcome.

Events take place throughout the East Bay, often centered on a specific goddess or theme. The women build an altar and sing, dance, pray, share their hopes and goals and draw on

each other for support.

"It's a time when I'm doing something just for me, and we're really working on positive thoughts and energy," Debi Cummings, of Concord, said.

While the group is not opposed to God or gods, focusing only on goddesses is an alternative to religions whose deities have male faces and names, Birely said.

Monday's solstice celebration was dedicated to Poli'ahu, the Hawaiian snow goddess. While Cummings has not had to deal with negative reaction to her beliefs, she's cautious about sharing them.

"You're just never sure how people are going to take that because there has been criticism or judgment in the past," Cummings said. "I realize now that people have these misconceptions because of our fear to bring forth and share our spirituality."

Those perceptions may be changing. Cummings said college students studying alternative religions to observe gatherings come to gatherings — more of them younger women, including teenagers, Birely said.

"It's a really cool blend of being in a community space where there's a lot of diversity but there's a commonality at the same time," Birely said, "and I think people like that."

CEREMONIAL SONG

We All Come From the Goddess
And to Her we shall return
Like of a drop of rain
Flowing to the Ocean

Solstice Song

Celebrate the birth of the Sun
Light the way Poliahu
Dance around on Sabbath night
Blessed be the Great Mother