



Odd holiday

BY David Wilcox / The Citizen

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If you find tinsel distracting or shy away from battling fellow shoppers for scarce gifts, Christmas may not be the best holiday for you to celebrate this month.

That's why there's a "Festivus for the rest of us."

This obscure holiday, most often observed on Dec. 23, was introduced to popular culture as part of a "Seinfeld" episode titled, "The Strike." George Costanza's father, Frank (Jerry Stiller), explains to Kramer that he invented Festivus as a straightforward alternative to Christmas: "Many Christmases ago, I went to buy a doll for my son. I reached for the last one they had, but so did another man. As I rained blows upon him, I realized there had to be another way! ... Out of that, a new holiday was born! A Festivus for the rest of us!"

Since the episode's 1997 airing, Festivus has become a staple of the holiday seasons of countless "Seinfeld" fans. Among them is Dr. Tim Delaney, an Auburn-based sociology professor who wrote "Seinology: The Sociology of Seinfeld."

Delaney believes Frank's philosophy appeals to people put off by the over commercialization of the holiday season.

"A lot of people still complain about it," Delaney said. "So Frank created his own holiday 'For the rest of us,' and I think that saying really illustrates its true meaning."

Festivus also de-emphasizes the religious themes of the holidays, but Delaney feels the occasion invites people of all beliefs to observe it.

"Festivus is a fun, non-threatening secular holiday," he said. "It's not like it's actively trying to overthrow Christmas or Hanukkah."

Though "Seinfeld" propelled awareness of the holiday, the popular sitcom is not its actual origin.

The episode was written by Daniel O'Keefe, whose father, also named Daniel, created the holiday in 1966. In a 2004 New York Times article, the younger O'Keefe remembered his family's Festivus celebrations as an amorphous collection of unusual activities, including wrestling matches and the reading of ways they've disappointed each other into a tape recorder.

O'Keefe packed into the episode's 20 minutes several peculiar details of Festivus that people across the world - mostly "Seinfeld" fans - have included in their own Festivus celebrations.

"What's funny about Festivus is not only is it a clever idea, but they actually give you props to work with," Delaney said. Perhaps most memorable is the aluminum pole, which was actually not part of the O'Keefe Festivus tradition. In Frank Costanza's holiday home, an unadorned silver pole stands in place of the Christmas tree. He praises the item for its "very high strength-to-weight ratio." However, the specifics of



its use - such as size and location in the home - are up to Festivus revelers. The pole can have the circumference of a telephone pole or a lacrosse shaft. It can be hung from the ceiling or placed in a plant pot.

Like most holidays, Festivus centers around a meal shared by loved ones. There is no turkey to its Thanksgiving, so cuisine is at the discretion of the host.

The next major part of the holiday is the airing of grievances, which follows the Festivus meal. Here Festivus opposes the feel-good spirit of family Christmas gatherings by encouraging everyone to tell everyone else at the table the manifold ways they've disappointed them over the previous year.

The grievances can be aired over the dinner table, written on a dry erase board on the refrigerator or spoken into a tape recorder, as the O'Keefe family did. However the disappointments are expressed, full disclosure is advised. Festivusbook.com notes that this segment of the day need not be followed by hugs or making up.

"I think the airing of grievances has all the elements of friends getting together and playing charades or something," Delaney said.

Festivus is also commemorated by observing "Festivus miracles," as Kramer twice did during the dinner at the Costanza's. Unlike wondrous Christmas miracles, Festivus miracles come in the form of misfortune to people at the table, as both Jerry and Elaine's "miracles" involved them receiving unwanted attention from members of the opposite sex.

And finally, the evening concludes with the feats of strength. The head of the household challenges someone at the table to a wrestling match, in which that person must pin the patriarch to conclude that year's Festivus.

This particular part of Festivus was the source of much stress for George Costanza (Jason Alexander), who fled in terror upon hearing a tape recording of a traumatic childhood contest with his father. Festivusbook.com suggests thumb wrestling or washer tossing - competitively throwing metal washers into a can - as less painful alternatives to freestyle wrestling.

"The feats of strength leads to all kinds of fun for people when they get together," said Delaney, whose Festivus parties are hosted by a fourth degree black belt no one dares to challenge to combat.

Just as "Seinfeld" added to the Festivus canon with the aluminum pole, revelers are free to improvise new elements of the holiday during their parties. The younger O'Keefe described a clock in a paper bag during one family Festivus, but he couldn't discern its significance.

What will you add to your Festivus celebration?

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