

Pagan students unite in new club

PAGANS, From 1A

dents so far have joined the alliance, which has been officially recognized by student government leaders at UW-Waukesha and is eligible to request funding from student fees.

It is believed to be the only such organization at any college or university in southeastern Wisconsin.

The club has raised eyebrows and drawn criticism from some at UW-Waukesha, yet administrators and student leaders are voicing tolerance and a willingness to learn.

"It's an opportunity for students to be exposed to new ideas," said Sue Kalinka, associate director of student services.

"People are actually finding their own little paths to the group. It's cool that we can help."

Amber Braun,
president of
UW-Waukesha's
Pagan Student
Alliance

Student government President Alan Stager acknowledged the potential for backlash and said he instructed club leaders to notify him if they experience hostility or discrimination on campus.

"Abolish the ignorance," Stager said.

Paganism, which includes a number of spiritual beliefs, is an Earth-based religious concept that draws heavily on seasonal changes, planetary movements and other natural forces.

In addition to the witchcraft-influenced Wicca, other forms include druidism, shamanism and celestialism.

A variety of backgrounds

Braun, who describes herself as a witch, said the UW-Waukesha club has attracted students from a variety of backgrounds, including some who are surprised to learn how closely paganism matches their own personal beliefs.

"People are actually finding their own little paths to the group," she said. "It's cool that we can help."

Officially recognized by the student government about two weeks ago, the club hopes to promote understanding of paganism through public informational efforts and demonstrations.

During the upcoming Halloween festivities — which pagans recognize as Samhain, a day to honor the dead — the Pagan Student Alliance plans to educate students and others about the myths and meanings of such holiday symbols as jack-o'-lanterns, ghouls and caldrons.

The club's vice president said there are many similarities between paganism and other religions. For example, the Wiccan ritual of casting spells, she said, is not much different from the Christian tradition of prayer.

"It's about working with each other," she said of the club's intentions. "We're not trying to preach, and we're not trying to convert."

The vice president, Kris, 37, of Waukesha, asked that her last name be withheld, saying some family members have been ridiculed and harassed for her witchcraft practices.

Criticism, curiosity

At UW-Waukesha, club members have heard occasional criticism, including one time when a fellow student told Braun she would "burn in hell" for her beliefs. For the most part, however, the group has generated a healthy curiosity about paganism, which is exactly what organizers had hoped.

Braun said she plans to request about \$1,500 in student fee funding, with the hope that the club will be able to continue after she graduates.

UW-Waukesha also has student clubs promoting Christianity and Islam.

David Weber, faculty adviser to the Campus Crusade for Christ, said that although he disagrees with pagan philosophy, he has no objection to having the new club on campus.

"Hopefully we're always searching for truth," he said. "Sometimes people have their own way of finding the truth."

On the Internet:
www.circlesanctuary.org, www.ccci.org,
www.msa-natl.org.