

## Culture - Faculty holiday celebrations

Nicholas Aguirre Zafiro | Video Editor

With a festive George Washington stitched across his blue sweater atop reindeers and hearts, Denver Brunsman prepared for the history department's annual "Holiday Huzzah."

Brunsman, an associate professor and the chair of the history department, said faculty and staff in the history department have gathered in Phillips Hall annually to enjoy catered food and stare at a digital yule log in their "Holiday Huzzah," a nod to celebratory chants of "huzzah" during the American Revolution. From historical homages to scientific sweets, the history department is one of many departments across GW marking the end of the fall semester and the start of the holiday season with discipline-specific celebrations.

Brunsman said his students gifted him a golden balloon sign that spells out "Huzzah," which serves as decor for series of "Huzzah" celebrations throughout the year, including the "Holiday Huzzah," the "First Huzzah" party that kicks off the academic year and the "Last Huzzah" that ends the academic year — bringing the department to three huzzahs, like the number of times Revolutionaries would traditionally chant the word.

"The American revolutionaries would chant 'huzzah,' usually three times when they were happy about something, and it was very common with toasts," Brunsman said. "So it's fun to have a historic term like that attached to our holiday celebration."

Brunsman said his department has hosted its annual holiday party for "as long as anyone can remember," though it was briefly interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic as GW pivoted to virtual instruction. Since returning to in-person instruction in 2021, he said resuming their winter tradition has been a fun way to get the department's faculty back together — especially professors whose teaching schedules don't typically align for spending time together.

"We spend a lot of time together throughout the year, and so I think if a university or a workplace is only work, it's actually counterproductive," Brunsman said. "It's counterproductive to the work itself."

From longtime history professors to faculty from other disciplines who are "friends of the department," Brunsman said at least 50 people show up to the Holiday Huzzah every year for socializing and catered food.

"It is a really nice way for people to connect and see each other outside of the strictly professional environment of a meeting or a class or some other obligation," Brunsman said. "It's nice that it's completely voluntary, and yet, most people come."

Brunsmann said they keep their huzzah “secular and nondenominational” to recognize that attendees come from a variety of cultural and religious traditions by not doing much one would think of as typically “holiday” outside of putting a digital yule log on a TV.

“It’s really as much a celebration of the end of the semester as it is the holiday season,” Brunsmann said.

Suse Anderson, an associate professor and the head of the museum studies graduate program, said her program marks the conclusion of the semester with festive gatherings, like the program’s annual holiday party in the Flag Building and the Museum Studies Student Association’s winter happy hour at Tonic, and commencement celebrations for their fall graduates. She said in years past, the program has organized mini processions up and down the steps of the Corcoran School of Art and Design’s Flagg Building for fall semester graduates who are unable to attend the traditional spring ceremony.

“It’s this really lovely way of just recognizing their achievement, because some of them will move out of the area and won’t be able to come back for the spring graduation,” Anderson said. “So we like to make sure that their work doesn’t go unnoticed, and that they have a chance to sort of recognize their own achievements with their cohort and their peers.”

Anderson said the museum studies program is not only “discipline agnostic,” with students from a variety of disciplines like art history, paleontology and political science, but also secular in how they celebrate. She said rather than connecting their winter celebration, full of food and “breaking bread,” to a specific holiday, the program labels it as a general holiday and end-of-year party.

“We always want all of our students to feel welcome, to be themselves and to show up as much of a whole person as they are comfortable bringing to grad school, which is different for different people,” Anderson said.

Alexander van der Horst, an associate professor and the chair of the physics department who has taught at GW since 2015, said GW’s “very active” chapter of the Society of Physics Students — a pre-professional organization for college students interested in physics — plans most of the department’s celebrations throughout the academic year, from the annual Halloween party to the holiday party. He said at the holiday party, the students in the organization often supply hot chocolate, cookies and homemade liquid nitrogen ice cream — a kind of ice cream that is [frozen](#) using liquid nitrogen instead of ice, giving it a creamier consistency.

“Yes, final exams are coming, but let’s hang out and put your mind to something else, and not being in your dorm room or in the library, just studying, and just kind of having that moment with friends and people you like to hang out with,” van der Horst said.

Van der Horst said he and Evangeline Downie, a professor of physics, spearheaded what they call a “quizmas” — a trivia game with biographical questions about the people of the physics

department and fun facts about GW — for the holiday party earlier on in his tenure at GW, which they have continued ever since. He said one year, they rounded up physics professors' baby pictures and had party attendees guess who was who.

Van der Horst said the Society of Physics Students has taken the reins on the trivia games over the last couple of years, bringing a "Jeopardy!" inspired game with similar trivia categories to the party this year.

"Even if the holidays are not that cheerful for someone, it's still important to be together with others and with people that you spend a lot of time with," van der Horst said.