

Perform for Freedom: Local Artists Raise Awareness for Global Issues at Freedom Café

Local performers, students, and community members come together at the weekly Perform for Freedom event at Durham's Freedom Café, blending creativity and social justice to raise awareness about human trafficking and other global issues.

Pacy Morgado, Staff Writer

On Wednesday nights from 6:30 to 10 p.m., the Freedom Café, located at 37 Main St., transforms into a stage of voices advocating for change at its Perform for Freedom event. Musicians, poets, and storytellers take turns under the spotlight, using their art to raise awareness about global issues.

Inside the warm café, a crowd of about 20 people gathered to listen, share, and support raising awareness for global issues, blending creativity with a powerful message of justice and hope. In this space, every note and word reflects a message of freedom.

"I just really felt good about being part of a project like this," said Alyssa Jones, a junior psychology major at the University of New Hampshire, who is responsible for managing the tech and sound for Perform for Freedom.

After taking over for a graduating friend, Jones has spent the past year ensuring the event runs smoothly. Her role includes setting up audio equipment, maintaining sound quality, and overseeing musical instruments.

"Since I've been coming here for two years and just doing homework, I was like, yeah, absolutely," Jones said when asked why she got involved. The café has seen significant growth in attendance, something Jones has noticed firsthand.

"My roommate and I freshman year, when we first came here, it would fill up, but not every seat. Now every couple of nights here, it's packed to the brim with people," she said.

"It's not just UNH students; it's people from the community. I've seen high schoolers, families, and older people – it's really diverse," Jones said, attributing this rise in attendance to their social media presence and word of mouth.

Beyond the performances, the event carries a deeper purpose of raising awareness about human trafficking and other global issues.



“The education is really reliant on Bryan Bessette,” Jones explained, referring to one of the café’s key organizers. “He’ll go up to the mic and share stories about trafficking or other world issues. It really brings awareness and educates everyone here.” This is one of the most important aspects of the event. “Awareness is the first step in the battle. You have to know what’s happening before you can do anything about it,” said Jones.

Madeline Healey, a high school senior at Oyster River, has also been a long-time contributor to the café. “I volunteered over 100 hours between my freshman and sophomore year, then I got hired in January and I’ve been working here ever since,” she said.

Now, Healey manages various aspects of the café’s operations, from being a barista to creating commissioned artwork and designing T-shirts, “The café is definitely catered towards my strengths, so I’ve got to help in those areas,” she said.

Healey emphasizes the importance of the café’s mission, not just during Perform for Freedom but in their day-to-day operations, “We do a lot about conscious consumerism and being a good consumer, knowing what that means and that we carry only brands that are ethically better, so we can get them out into the communities,” she said.

One of the companies the café supports is Divine Chocolate, which is owned by chocolate farmers in Ghana, West Africa – one of the countries grappling with the problem of forced labor in the chocolate supply chain.

Bessette explains that the farmers have formed a cooperative that ensures they receive a share of the profits for every piece of Divine Chocolate sold. This worker-owned model is transformative for their communities.

During the education portion of the event, Bessette discussed the forced labor that is happening around the world, using the Sweat & Toil app, created by the U.S. Department of Labor that provides information about forced labor, child labor, and human trafficking around the world.

For Healey, working at the café is more than just a job. “It’s taught me a lot as a person. It’s not just about the paycheck, it’s about helping the community and becoming a better person,” she said.

Aidan Turner, a senior studying program and event management, discovered the café after transferring to UNH. “I was just looking for stuff around town where I could put myself out there,” he said.

Turner, who has been playing guitar and singing for over 10 years, found Perform for Freedom to be the perfect place to showcase his work. “The environment’s great. It’s not stressful at all. Everybody’s super nice and you can come up and do anything you want. People will listen,” he said.

For Turner, his biggest challenge has been creating music. “I remember last year I made it a goal to write a song and perform it at least once a week. It was a great way to push myself creatively,” he said.

The café’s mission of education, community, and conscious consumerism extends beyond just performances. Jones noted that even those who come for the music leave with a better understanding of the causes the café supports.

“When we get a big turnout, people make donations, ask our baristas questions, and want to get more involved. It’s just a way for more people to be directly involved,” Jones said.

“I always try to let people know about our mission, even if they’re just here for a coffee... A big thing about the Freedom Cafe is that it’s about community. More than anything else, it’s about that safe space where you can be open about who you are and what you do and what you like, and there’s no worrying about backlash, or being judged,” said Healey.

The ultimate focus of the café remains clear: it’s about putting good into the world. Whether you’re performing or just hanging out, you’re becoming a part of something bigger.