

Looks not books: UNH student brings The Clothing Library to Seacoast

[Aqeel Hisham](#) Portsmouth Herald

Published Nov. 29, 2023



NEWMARKET — Stella McShera has turned her barn into a closet space. Leather and fur jackets were laid out on a table to air out, while clothes that “didn’t make the cut” were placed in labeled bags, ready to be donated.

“We easily have like 1,500 (pieces of clothing),” she said.

Inside her home, clothing racks filled a spare bedroom that once was her husband’s office, where blazers, blouses and button-downs are now neatly hung across metal bars. Although this may look like typical hoarder or shopaholic behavior, none of the clothes are from or for her closet.

McShera, a recent Newmarket resident after moving from Los Angeles, is spearheading a pilot program called [The Clothing Library](#) at Dover Public Library as part of her master's studies in

degrowth at the University of New Hampshire. Designed to work similarly to a traditional library, the six-week program allows visitors to borrow outfits instead of books.

McShera, who loves style, expressed her dislike for the fashion industry, which she called “one of the biggest polluters and also the biggest labor violators.” She said The Clothing Library aims to challenge the need to buy and instead encourages borrowing clothes.

“That is the behavior we’re looking for to help enable ... the idea is that you don’t have to own it if you have access to it,” she said.

What does The Clothing Library offer?

Located on the second floor of the [Dover Public Library](#) (in the Lecture Hall) at 73 Locust St., The Clothing Library will be open to the public beginning Sunday, Dec. 3, through mid-January. Hours will be Sundays 1 to 5 p.m. and Mondays 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Whether you are going to a wedding, graduation, job interview or a first date, chances are The Clothing Library will have a look for you. Co-founder Casey Philbrick said the library specializes in occasion wear for both men and women, carrying sizes XXS through XXL.

“It’s all these (occasions) that you might want something new for, but you might not need it every day,” she said. “The Clothing Library in all of its intentions is to be size inclusive ... the goal was to have five items per category, per size and per season.”

The clothes offered at the library came from donations from local thrift and vintage stores such as [Hello Again](#), [The Fabulous Find](#) and [New Moon](#). McShera and Philbrick spent months curating items that will go into the library, taking into account aspects such as brand, material and quality. The items not making the cut will be donated, they said.

“We got LL Bean, we got vintage petticoats... we got vintage from the '50s,” said McShera. “We got fast fashion because we’re not shying away, but we don’t want them to go into landfills.”

How does The Clothing Library work?

Like a traditional library, visitors who want to borrow items from The Clothing Library must have a membership with the Dover Public Library, where the pilot program is based.

Visitors can check out a specific item or a whole look for up to two weeks at a time at no cost.

McShera said each item must be cleaned before being returned. Returned clothes will be inspected by the “clothing librarians” who will thoroughly look for “stains, smells and repairs.”

“When someone checks an item out, we’ll give them a laundry sheet as well,” added Philbrick. “The idea is we’re going to encourage everybody to want to return everything clean, but if it is dry clean only, obviously that burden does fall on the person who’s borrowing them. We would hope that if you’re borrowing a \$400 dress, a \$20 dry cleaning (is manageable) ... we do have things that are quite expensive.”

The Clothing Library Fashion Show at Dover Library

A fashion show on Friday, Dec. 1, will kick off The Clothing Library program, where librarians will model looks from three different collections: Professional Punk Rock, Winter Wonderland and Dress Up to Get Down.

The show is free and will take place at the Dover Public Library from 6 to 8 p.m. Get your tickets at <https://rb.gy/vdbpjc>.

Ten librarians from all over Seacoast New Hampshire and Maine will strut down the runway, showcasing clothing pieces and looks that can be borrowed. McShera said it’s very important librarians are the models.

“The models we’re using are from a 00 to a size 22,” McShera said. “That was very intentional.”

Philbrick said as a plus-size woman herself, it’s important that people of all sizes have access and can utilize The Clothing Library.

“It’s really interesting to be in this day and age where designers are becoming more size-inclusive and making sure that we have that,” she added. “We just want to make it easy for everyone.”

Before settling in the Seacoast, McShera lived in Los Angeles for 12 years and, before that, in Portland, Oregon. She founded Portland Fashion Week – the third longest-running fashion week in the country behind New York and Los Angeles – and started a fashion incubator for small businesses in the industry.

The idea of The Clothing Library had been in McShera’s mind long before she moved from the West to the East Coast. She chose the Seacoast as the perfect location to launch it.

“It’s the community,” she said. “It needed to be small, and it really needed to be addressing a genuine need versus another new thing in LA... I didn’t want it to be another shiny thing for LA to claim. I want it to be a genuine use to a community.”

McShera hopes if the pilot program is successful, it will grow and expand to different towns, with each having its own cooperative running it.

“So instead of a hierarchical structure like the ownership model, it would be a democratic structure,” she said, referring to The Clothing Library cooperative. "With co-founders, decision-making is slower, but it’s more representative of what the community needs."

Although new to the area, McShera said she’s proud to have chosen the Seacoast as the “birthplace of The Clothing Library.”

“I founded enough businesses, I don’t need another thing that’s mine,” she said. “I want something that’s ours.”