Tabitha McElroy

Tabitha McElroy will tell you straight-up: she’s not remarkable, she’s just 35.

It’s her funny way of recognizing that she’s got a few years and lots of life experience on her fellow undergraduates, but she embraces her “non-traditional” status and all the work-life-school balance it requires. “I’ve had what you might call a very crash-course life,” says this member of the Class of 2020. McElroy is a mother, wife, activist, and UNH sophomore, and has most recently been working in development for the Freedom Café, a Durham-based non-profit that seeks to end human trafficking globally.

It was the story of local survivor Jasmine Marino of Saugus, Mass., a survivor of human trafficking, which has grown to a $9 billion international industry based on the trade and exploitation of millions of people around the world, that caught McElroy’s attention. She could see herself in Jasmine’s story — she knew her pain. Tabitha was raised in a cult that was eventually shut down by the federal government in 2006. So when she heard Marino talking about being trapped, being controlled by other people, not having control over her money, being denied education, Tabitha knew what she meant. “I looked into these victims’ eyes and heard their stories. My experience wasn’t exactly the same thing, but it was the same thing, because it was about being controlled by other people.” She was hooked.

“I fell in love, like when you fall in love with a boy for the first time, and you can’t think of anything else,” she says of her interest in joining the fight against human exploitation. “I was utterly focused on helping Freedom Café by doing the thing I’m really good at, which is development and marketing. I can sell anything to anyone,” says Tabitha, who brought 17 years of nonprofit sector experience to the role.

Before moving back to New Hampshire a few years ago, Tabitha lived in Alaska with her husband and young daughter. It was there that she hired tutors to make up for the education denied her as an adolescent, and she and her family decided to move to New Hampshire for better educational opportunities for her daughter. She had been thinking of going to college, but didn’t want to fail. “I wasn’t sure how to make the career I’d already had work into a degree that was applicable… how do you go back to school when you’re over 30?” But in New Castle she found a network of “incredibly powerful, highly educated women” who told her that she was very smart, and simply undereducated. They made her feel she was capable of achieving any educational goal she set for herself. So she started slowly, taking classes as a continuing education student, doing it part-time. And while she may have first chosen UNH because of its proximity (she considers herself a single mom most of the year, as her husband’s job on an oil rig keeps him away from home for months at a time), she says the relationships she’s built here remind her every day that she’s made the right choice. “I think what I’ve benefited the most from isn’t even necessarily what I’ve learned in class, but the faculty members I’ve met. The professors at UNH are the most incredible people. They all are so invested in their students,” she says. She counts Tim Barretto, Davida Margolin and Brittni Balloch Mulkigian among those caring professors.

It was because of Freedom Café that Tabitha first started sharing the story of her family background — when bartering for event space for the Freedom Café Gala last fall, the director of 3S Artspace asked her to share her personal story during their PechaKucha storytelling night the same month.

“I bit the bullet, and said I would do it. I found that when I got into UNH, there was no hiding it anymore. It comes up in so many different capacities. And I also decided that when you go to school, it’s a growth opportunity for young people, or for people my age. School gives you this safe space to realize who you are and what you are and get comfortable with it.”

She feels like hers is just one story amid a sea of interesting stories and backgrounds of her classmates and peers. “Everybody’s story is different, every student sitting in a classroom has a different path for how they got there,” she said. With undergraduate degrees in communication and community leadership, Tabitha will apply to graduate school with strong programs in international development. Her long-term plan is to work on a global humanitarian scale.

She’s gotten some harsh feedback for a style that she says is a mix of “being obnoxious and being a social butterfly” around her advocacy work. She counts one recent uncomfortable phone call as a pivotal point. “When I heard the criticism that I was just seeking attention, I thought, ‘you’re right, I am seeking attention. I’m seeking everyone’s attention, that’s what development is.’ And if I reek of desperation, it’s because I’m desperate to see this world better than it was when I came into it.”

She calls her new project with Haven NH, a nonprofit that helps victims of sexual and domestic assault, a continuation of her efforts to be the change she wants to see in the world.

“I’m hoping to exercise that tiny teacup of talent that we all have, and turn it into something global.”