When Rachel Avery was a high school senior, she tried to figure out: How can I actually go to college? She chose UNH Manchester for its affordability, but she soon realized that was just one of the things she loved about her school. “My experience quickly went from ‘This is my only option’ to ‘Wow, I actually love it here and wouldn’t have chosen anything different,’” Rachel says.

Avery, who will graduate in May with dual degrees in English and History, pursued her passions for inclusion and social justice during her four years at UNH, and became a source of strength and guidance for her peers along the way.

When she started college, Avery was working 25 hours a week at Market Basket and commuting to school using a car she shared with two brothers. The challenge, she recalls, was figuring out how to balance those schedule constraints with truly engaging in the life of the school. The turning point came when she was offered a student-worker job in the Academic Advising Office. It allowed her to leave the Market Basket job and spend more time on campus. “Work became less about making money and more about learning things about myself and developing professionally,” she says. “That job made college a really enriching experience and not just somewhere that I was going to get a degree.”

That was second semester of her freshman year, and the role was key to Avery becoming a campus leader who helped connect and support her peers. She became a peer assistant leader (PALS Program) and orientation leader, where she honed her skills as a peer advisor, and, most important to her, a committed listener.

She founded the Student Coalition for Service and Empowerment (SCSE), which provides volunteer opportunities for students at local organizations such as the New Hampshire Food Bank and Families in Transition. As part of that umbrella group, she also co-founded “Coffee and Culture,” a monthly discussion group for students.

Her supervisor in Academic Advising, Kaitlyn Squibb, lauded Avery’s work as a facilitator of those open group meetings. “Rachel is knowledgeable and could easily teach others about topics of identity, social justice, and equity. However, she never asserts her own knowledge or experiences over others but uses this platform to empower others.”

“I am people-driven, because I find purpose in meaningful connection and creating change that helps people. I wanted a space for something student-led that was social-justice oriented,” Rachel explains.

She completed the Student Leadership Academy, a rigorous program that includes four extra academic courses, formalized community involvement at a leadership level and a capstone project. Rachel had been a part of a Social Justice course that sought to evaluate and address food insecurity on campus. Although the class ended, Rachel continued her efforts to create the Free Food Pantry and maintain it throughout her junior year. Others have recognized Avery’s dedication to her fellow students: She garnered several awards at the Student Leadership Awards ceremony at the end of her junior year, including the most prestigious Heart of UNH Manchester Award.

Finding her own voice and lifting those of others are the values that drive her passion for social justice. Originally from Wolfeboro, Avery grew up in Goffstown and New Boston in a very conservative Christian household, something she says as a teenager she realized “didn’t make sense to me.” She spent time processing how to respectfully break from those beliefs she had grown up with, which framed how she understood the world. “When that splinters, where do you go next? That can break apart what you believe to be true about the world. But at my core, I still love people, and believe in all of us helping each other. I was able to translate some of those values into how to make my own choices, and to develop my own perspective.” That perspective is also shaped by one sibling’s struggle with substance abuse. It’s important to Rachel that access to help and recovery is available for anyone struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues. “Just witnessing what he has access to, and how that’s been important to him still being alive and facing ongoing challenges, that to me has been personally motivating.”

Her History degree is a large part of that lifting of voices, too. She studied abroad in the UK, where she and two professors had the chance to converse with former IRA members and former unionist paramilitary members as part of research on domestic terrorism. “We talked about societal divides of the past, and how you overcome them in the present,” says Rachel, who plans to work in the nonprofit sector after she graduates. “I’m compelled by the drive to know our history and the people who’ve come before us, and to know about the people whose voices have been erased.”