

Kennebunk Free Library to host domestic violence awareness event

The panel, which was organized as part of an event series put on by Finding Our Voices, will take place on Wednesday, Oct. 18.



BY [ELOISE GOLDSMITH](#)COURIER/POST



Finding Our Voices Founder Patrisha McLean (far left) with two women who will also speak during the “Let’s Talk About It” library series, Mary Lou Smith (center) and Jeannine Oren (right). Eloise Goldsmith photo

In fall of last year, Bethany Perkins took a brave step and decided to leave her abusive relationship. She moved in with friends and began to establish a life on her own, though she said she still dealt with feelings of shame and guilt that her marriage was “failed.”

Listening to the radio one day, she heard about an event at the Scarborough Public Library — a photo exhibit and panel talk featuring domestic abuse survivors put on by the domestic abuse awareness group Finding Our Voices. She decided to go and heard testimonies from multiple survivors. At the event, she had a chance to speak with some of the panelists.

“I went on to find permanent housing away from [my ex husband] and file divorce papers. They didn’t even tell me to do that. They just heard my story and let me cry and said: ‘Whatever you do, you’re still strong and you’re not a failure,’” said Perkins.

“It fortified me and made me feel secure in my choice,” she remembered.

Fast forward a year, and Perkins is now planning on telling her own story at Kennebunk Free Library on Wednesday, Oct. 18. The event is part of a library panel series called “Let’s Talk About It” from Finding Our Voices in partnership with multiple libraries in Maine. Each panel will feature Maine survivors talking about their experience with abuse as well as the impact the abuse had on their children. The event in Kennebunk, which will run from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., will also feature two short films and audience members will be invited to pose questions and share their own thoughts.

“Let’s Talk About It” events will take place during October — which happens to be National Domestic Violence Awareness Month — through Nov. 28. The full schedule of events is available at: <https://findingourvoices.net/events-1>. In addition to Kennebunk, libraries in Millinocket, Northeast Harbor, Bar Harbor, Camden, Damariscotta, and York are also taking part.

Allison Atkins, the assistant director and head of adult programming at the Kennebunk Free Library, said that the library is excited to host the event to shine a spotlight on this issue. “We want people to be able to learn about other experiences and learn something about themselves in the process,” she said.

Prior to this event series, Finding Our Voices hosted a panel at Freeport Community Library this past spring, following the success of the first panel at [Scarborough Public Library](#) in fall 2022.

Patrishia McLean, the founder of Finding Our Voices, said the events are crucial for raising awareness about the “epidemic” of domestic abuse. The point of the tour is to “reframe domestic abuse so all understand how complicated, insidious, and pervasive it is,” McLean said.

Data suggests that domestic violence — a term often used interchangeably with domestic abuse — impacts approximately [10 million](#) people in the United States. A 2010 report from the [Center for Disease Control](#) found that “more than 1 in 3 women (35.6 percent) and more than 1 in 4 men (28.5 percent) in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime.”

Data [collected](#) by the U.S. Justice Department in 2014 shows that intimate partner domestic violence decreased significantly, by 67 percent, between 1994 and 2012, but experts [caveat](#) that statistics likely underrepresent how truly widespread the issue is due to various legal, social and systemic roadblocks to data collection.

Advocates also [emphasize](#) that domestic abuse is not necessarily physically violent. According to the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#), domestic violence “includes behaviors that physically harm, intimidate, manipulate, or control a partner or otherwise force them to behave in ways they don’t want to. This can happen through physical violence, threats, emotional abuse, or financial control.

McLean said that these library events aim to make that clear “that emotional abuse is abuse; that it is not our shame, and that there is a way out.”

McLean is not just an advocate for domestic abuse survivors, she is herself a survivor. McLean is a photojournalist by trade and was motivated to connect with and photograph other survivors after her former husband, singer/songwriter Don McLean, was arrested for domestic violence in 2016. In 2019 she held a multi-media exhibit in her hometown of Camden where she featured photo portraits of 14 Maine survivors of domestic abuse. The exhibit then morphed into Finding Our Voices, which still spreads awareness through photography — it has published a series of posters that display the faces of domestic abuse survivors — but has other projects, including one to secure pro bono dental work for women and children survivors of domestic abuse.

The organization is growing, and [recently](#) brought on its first full-time staff member, thanks to a \$7,500 grant.

The event Wednesday is slate to have eight women, including McLean and Bethany Perkins, speak.

When asked what she hopes event-goers will get out of the panel, Perkins said “a lot of people don’t see emotional and verbal abuse as real abuse.

They question themselves when they're thinking of leaving a situation like that," rationalizing that the situation isn't that bad because they're not experiencing physical abuse."

"I want them to know if they're constantly feeling belittled and like they don't have a voice in their relationship and always put down or feeling small — that's abuse too. No one deserves that."