The Maneater • February 18, 2026 • https://themaneater.com/134006/move/columbias-newest-intimate-event-cozy-sessions-takes-over-dream-tree-academy/

Columbia's newest intimate event, 'Cozy Sessions, ' takes over Dream Tree Academy

'Cozy Sessions' founder Kareem Goins opens up about the event's creation

Deacon Lipsmeyer, MOVE Reporter

As audience members trickled into the Dream Tree Academy lobby on Feb. 13, it became clear the show they were about to see was not like any of Columbia's other Friday night musical offerings. Each guest was handed a piece of paper and asked to find a seat. Large couches and soft chairs filled the room in a semicircle, as opposed to the standing-room-only nature of venues like Rose Music Hall. There was something far more intimate about this show, something cozy.



Deacon Lipsmeyer

Local musician Sethen Backer, who goes by The Grassquatch, used his open mic time to perform David Bowie's "Modern Love" on Friday, Feb. 13 at Dream Tree Academy in Columbia, Mo. The cover was well received by audience members and other performers alike.

This is exactly the kind of energy that founder Kareem Goins set out to create last year when he started the "Cozy Sessions." Growing up in Chicago, Goins found himself heavily inspired by the city's flourishing open mic scene. After moving to Columbia to attend the University of Missouri, he became determined to bring a piece of that with him to the city.

"I used to go to an open mic out in Chicago called Young Chicago Authors, and it was just kind of important in my growth as an artist to go there," Kareem said. "Because I would not only perform and get better, but like, every week, I had something to look forward to. "Since I moved to Columbia, I wanted to have something similar to that, and I want people to get the same feeling I got as far as being excited for something to improve their artistry."

The event truly began coming to fruition in early 2025 when Goins met Dream Tree Academy founder Raymond Hall. Together, the two worked out a system in which Goins teaches entrepreneurship skills to Hall's students during the week in exchange for use of the Dream Tree space once a month to host the "Cozy Sessions."

"Two years ago, Raymond Hall, the owner of Dream Tree, he kind of discovered me with everything that I was already doing," Goins said. "So I do volunteer work at Dream Tree Academy throughout the week, helping kids learn financial literacy and entrepreneurship. You know, being better people in the community. So in return, he said, since I'm volunteering, I can utilize the space whenever I want."

Back at the show, Goins, who goes by the stage name Sirkareem, kicked off the night by introducing the show's writing workshop. Tonight, audience members write a five-minute poem dedicated to a word they hate. As time expires, guests of every background step up to the mic to share their stories. A piece written for the word "no" opens the night's readings, followed by one for the word "hate," then for the word "help." While the poems may vary in length and content, the reception for each is the same: a thunderous roar of applause.

Once the poetry reading finished, the actual open mic portion of the night began. Performers brought out pianos and guitars to debut original music, as well as renditions of classics such as David Bowie's "Modern Love." It's not just songwriters who step up to the stage; poets come up and deliver heartfelt lines that tug at the audience's emotions. With the show taking place just a day before Valentine's Day, many of the performances centered around just that: the love we all share.

Quietly in the corner, artists Craig Miles and Vanessa Torres were working on massive canvases, which finally began to take form. Both paintings fully embrace the theming of the night, with Miles' painting depicting a couple tenderly kissing in front of a colorfully abstract background of blues and yellows. Torres decides to take a different approach, having her figures wrap themselves around each other, swimming in swirls of purple and white.

Finally, it's time for the last event of the night: performances by Sirkareem and Fox Deluxe. During his set, Kareem played several original songs before taking a moment to pause and reflect with the audience. He shared his fear of the current state of the world before launching into a special cover of Chance the Rapper's "Paranoia," a song that discusses fears of overpolicing and rampant gun violence. The ending of the song, Chance's iconic lyric, "I know you scared / You should ask us if we're scared, too / I know you scared / Me too," is echoed out by the entire audience.

In a world where even reading the news has become a tiring task, spaces that encourage community participation and emotional safety have become more important than ever. A "Cozy Session" might not feel like the traditional concert environment that most people are used to, but that's because it's not supposed to. It's a place for all of Columbia's artists to come and perform, not just the ones who can pack out Rose.

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