

Personal Narrative Essay

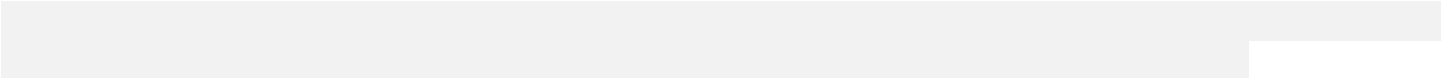
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Introduction

Each individual, regardless of creed, race, or gender, has their story to tell. These stories include life experiences, such as hardships and successes, that define the path they took, who they are now, and who they may be in the future. All of these events culminate into what is called a “personal brand,” which is the combination of an individual’s skills, values, and impressions they leave on others (Montañez, 2023). It can be thought of as a personal and public image. Over time, I have built my personal brand, which helped me with networking, enrolling, and interning at Old Dominion University (ODU). It assisted me in selecting my major, cybersecurity, and refining what specific careers I might want to pursue. However, like others, my story has a beginning.

Childhood

We all start somewhere, and that somewhere is childhood. I imagine mine as a relatively normal experience, if not privileged, when compared to what my friends endured. I have had my share of adversity, though nothing as severe as what my parents recounted. However, there were small but meaningful moments in my childhood that led to my decision to pursue cybersecurity.

One of these moments was my first experience with a computer, one that I will always remember. I watched my dad play Adobe Flash games, which were cheap, crudely made video games that could be played on a web browser, such as Google Chrome. Rather than focusing on the game’s contents, I was interested in how moving the mouse shifted the cursor on the screen, how games and websites even functioned, and why the computer was staggeringly slow. I was no

child prodigy, and I only knew computer science and information technology later in high school, but this moment ingrained my lifelong fascination with computers.

Another major moment in my childhood was when my mom offered me a choice to enroll in swimming lessons at the Bayside recreation center and back-to-back Taekwondo training sessions. I, preferring to stay home all day, initially rejected the opportunity. But my mom told me, “Try it before you judge it.” I agreed to these “strenuous” after-school activities because I feared agitating my mom. Now, as I look back, if I had never chosen that opportunity, I might not be where I am today. I never left my comfort zone. I was a risk-averse individual, but this defining memory taught me to push my boundaries. Not everyone is offered a chance, so take it.

Middle School

My middle school years tested my patience, but they also presented unique opportunities. In my final semester at Bayside Middle School, I was worried, as I was not interested in or pursuing any particular career. I held the notion that my peers were set for life, that they knew what school, profession, and lifestyle they wanted. This was the case until Bayside Middle School announced a high school fair at the Virginia Beach Convention Center. At this fair, several high schools from across the Hampton Roads region presented their academies, which are specialized programs. Up to this point, I had enrolled in computer literacy classes and tinkered with block coding, so I searched for a high school that offered options similar to my interests. One “high school” appealed to me, and it was the Advanced Technology Center, or ATC.

The ATC offered engineering, programming, and modeling courses. However, they caught my interest with their cybersecurity course. To me, it was one of a kind. Throughout my life, I enjoyed using computers, and for me to use the skills I have learned to secure technologies for other people, it meant everything to me. Having a stable salary was important, but I wanted purpose. I wanted to be happy, so what could be better than having a job you love? I left the fair with ATC as my only academy option. No other school sufficed.

As always, I encountered problems. I had to write three essays for the three courses (primary, secondary, and third choice) I planned to enroll in. Not everyone would be accepted into their first pick, which was why there were two fallback choices. My middle school advisor was also doubtful that the ATC would accept my application since they normally accepted only those from juniors and seniors. Additionally, I would have to enroll in high school summer classes before attending my first semester at Bayside High School. It was daunting, but I overcame these obstacles after a few months. I proved to my advisor that I had the drive to, yet again, push my boundaries and attain my goals. I learned to be patient and that some choices require sacrifice. Life was unfair, but I had to adapt.

High School

Because of my efforts, I was the first-ever freshman in Bayside High School to attend the ATC. I was confident at the challenges I would face, as I had already taken several summer classes to fit my ATC cybersecurity course into my complicated schedule. Yet again, I was blissfully unaware as to what I would experience in my years ahead. These were the years that influenced my decision to pursue cybersecurity as a career and choose Old Dominion University as my college.

My peers in my cybersecurity class were juniors and seniors, and there were only two sophomores. Needless to say, I felt intimidated. I believed I could not outperform my classmates. It was not that I wanted to be the perfect or best student; rather, I wanted to prove to myself that I deserved to be in this class, that I could hold my ground. Two years later, I was the unofficial underdog in my cybersecurity class. I studied and tested for several required certification exams. I earned Microsoft Technology Associate (MTA) certifications for Networking and Security Fundamentals. Additionally, I earned Network+ and Security+ CompTIA certifications, all while navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite being a virtual learner for half my freshman year and all of my sophomore year, I passed the class with industrially recognized certifications under my belt. I had a secure foundation in cybersecurity, which I planned to build upon in the future.

In my junior and senior years, I felt welcomed but also intimidated. There were two freshmen enrolled in my new programming class, while I was now a junior. I learned to accept it and not be so stumped by competition. I had my own battles, but so did they. I succeeded in this programming class, earned a Microsoft Office Specialist certification in Microsoft Access, and competed in the Great Computer Challenge of 2023, which was hosted at ODU. Eventually, I even competed in the Future Business Leaders of America in 2023 on the state and national levels. I became independent, and I, alone, chose the path I took. Cybersecurity was one of my passions that could foreseeably become one of my career goals since I had certificates. Considering ODU offered a major in cybersecurity, I applied and was accepted to ODU.

College

My years at ODU were quick. I accrued enough college credits to skip several general education courses. I was no longer the class of 2027 but the class of 2026. The majority of my coursework stemmed from my required principle and application courses.

One course I remember fondly taking in the fall of 2025 was IDS 300, or Interdisciplinary Research. After my professor narrowed down the scope of my research topic, I decided to discuss how legal guidelines affected the field of digital forensics. Little did I know this would impact the specific career I desired in cybersecurity. Not only did I have to dabble in regulations, such as the Daubert Standard and the Federal Rules of Evidence, but I also had to connect these standards on reliable evidence to revolutionary technology that digital forensic analysts used.

My goal of working in digital forensics and cybercrime was cemented when I selected a cybercriminology foundations class and a digital forensics class as, respectively, my principle and application courses. I sought to apply my knowledge and certifications to something of use. I wanted to work in criminal justice, whose values coincided with that of cybersecurity and mine: honesty, integrity, and perseverance. These were the values that I upheld in my past and present, and I will continue to do so for the future.

Conclusion

My sense of justice, morality, and ethics and my love for technology impacted my decision to pursue a career in cybersecurity, specifically in digital forensics. Cybersecurity is almost blood to me; it is a culmination of the choices I have made in my childhood, teenage years, and young adulthood. I am currently enrolled in the Cyber Clinic (CYSE 368) for my internship and curious to see how it will impact my personal and career goals. However, nothing

in life is set in stone. Smith (2017) states, “Yet unlike most stories we’ve heard, our lives don’t follow a predefined arc. Our identities and experiences are constantly shifting, and storytelling is how we make sense of it.” I am bound to change. My interests may shift. I may have already reached the highest point of my life, and I might see my lowest point soon. There are events that are beyond my control, but I just have to endure them. They impact my narrative identity, and they give my life meaning and purpose.

For now, my story “ends.” Tomorrow, I will pick it back up, go through my day, and write again.

References:

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