Ctrl + Me

Building a Brand, a Story, and a Self that Syncs

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Finding My Cursor

We get asked a lot growing up…What do you want to be when you grow up? I had no idea, but I did know I loved to problem solve and would fixate on a computer problem like my life depended on it, but other than that, I was like every other young adult who thought we had it all figured out, but did not. I have always been driven, but I did not always have the tools or language to express that fully. Sometimes it just came out all jumbled or not concise enough. I had always hoped to become bright, tactful, full of life, and accomplished. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, as you'll come to see—my high hopes did not always align with the events in my life. As Smith (2017) explains, "we often tell two kinds of stories, the story of what happened and how we make sense of it." In my case, learning to make sense of disappointment became its own kind of hope.

I have spent much of my life trying to get those two narratives to sync up. My stories started to make sense when I chose to enlist in the Navy after some seasons of odd jobs here and there, and couch surfing started looking like park benches. My jumbled lifestyle became an opportunity to focus and regroup. I learned to be tactful, protected my eagerness to live life fully, and met my husband. This is ultimately why I decided to major in cybersecurity at Old Dominion University. Who I wanted to be began to align with who I actually was in the moment—a version of myself, a brand even, that I hoped my children would look to when answering the question, "Who do you want to be when you grow up?" So how did it all begin…?

Hardwired for Drive – The Grit Before the Gloss

A Southside of Chicago kid wants to join the Navy, blows the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, and is assigned undesignated. This translates to the Navy's need for you, but not in a particular job. So I landed on top of an aircraft carrier within six months of taking that

test. According to Montañez, your brand is more than a curated image; there is clarity and consistency (2023). While working on the flight deck may seem out of the realm in cybersecurity, it's exactly what my story needed. I adapted quickly under pressure and led gracefully while ensuring we were where we needed to be for mission readiness. That is precisely how I approach my tasks in the cyber realm and study for future certifications. I study and absorb for clarity to understand what is being asked and the needs of the task so I can complete the task to my utmost ability. There are failures, but failures are just that - one word, and there are always more words, more chances. This thinking became a part of me, and my image. My husband, who at the time was also in the Navy, is also of the same line of thinking, but he, which I do love to point out as we have been married for a decade, made a mistake, a "minor error" as he would call it. But one could say, the mistake is in the way where a total stranger would say, "really, you did what?!"

New Login – Becoming a Cyber Student

The "really, you did what?" moment was clicking on one of the infamous phishing emails. After falling for this phishing scam, someone stole his debit and credit card information right out from under him. Now let me preface this with, I was used to the gift, I can spot potential hazards a mile away, count exits, assess potential threats, etc, but what I did not expect was something of this nature. I did not grow up with computers, and it is not that they were not around; our family could not afford things like that. So it was not in my brain to even think of cyber awareness. After fixing all of our banking information, I began researching. I was a mom and wife now; it was my job to ensure my family was safe inside our home. So I started by asking what exactly a phishing email was and how they did it. How is it accomplished? Is it

ethical? Moreover, there it struck, my aha moment, the unity between who I wanted to be and who I was to become.

My journey of becoming has had its share of ups and downs, as reflected in my abundance of Diet Coke cans in our recycling compost. From C++ to Kali Linux, Splunk Certification, Sec+, Network +, and more, my education has been a transformative experience. Smith describes the redemption arc as "the moment our past and future selves finally speak the same language- is where meaning often lies" (2017). My past story gains clarity when combined with my education here at Old Dominion University. I find comfort and purpose in coding, analyzing data traffic, and protecting those I love most in an ever-growing digital age.

Ctrl + Me – Building a Brand That's True

Following Montañez's guidance, I work to focus my brand around transparency, precision, and purpose (2023). I love a little glam, but usually it is not always about the loud or most outstanding achievement, but the honest display of readiness and resilience. I am given a problem and I fix it. If I can not fix it, I figure out who can and learn, even if it means learning an entirely new skill. As Nguyen describes, I must reflect on these skills and keep momentum forward, two things I carry with me professionally (2013). This is especially true as I documented my growth across my classes. At ODU, experiencing CYSE 270, 302, and 301 helped shape what I know and who I am becoming as a cybersecurity professional. In Networking Basics (CYSE 270), I learned how to build and secure networks, stay calm under pressure, and work through problems step by step, skills that help me in any team setting. Cybersecurity Fundamentals (CYSE 302) gave me the technical tools to understand threats and defend systems. However, it also taught me to think critically and explain things clearly, even when complex. Then in Cybersecurity Philosophy (CYSE 301), I was invited to think deeper

about the why behind systems. It made me reflect on ethics, responsibility, and how technology impacts people, especially those in areas we may not expect. These courses did not just teach me hard skills; they helped me grow in confidence, integrity, and direction. They are a big part of why I feel like I can now say I'm building a trustworthy brand—"ctrl + me"—because I'm learning to lead with my values and voice. Taking Cybersecurity, Technology and Society (CYSE 200T), at ODU was my introduction to the cybersecurity world—it opened my eyes to how deeply security affects everyday life and made me realize this field is where I belong. In Cyber Law (CYSE 406), I learned how attackers think and how to spot vulnerabilities, which sharpened my technical instincts and attention to detail. Cybersecurity Strategy and Policy (CYSE 425W) pushed me to write clearly about technical topics, which was not easy initially, but it helped me become more confident in communicating complex ideas. Cybersecurity Fundamentals (CS 462), took that even further, challenging me with secure coding practices and software vulnerabilities that required real problem-solving under pressure. Cybersecurity Ethics (PHIL 355E), helped me step back and ask big questions about technology and ethics, something I didn't expect to enjoy, but it gave me a stronger sense of purpose in my work. Interdisciplinary Theory and Concepts (IDS 300W), pulled all of this together, helping me reflect on how my skills, experiences, and values are all part of a bigger story. These experiences taught me more than just how to protect systems; they taught me how to own my growth, speak up, and stay grounded in what matters. That is what "ctrl + me" is all about: showing up as my whole self, with skills and integrity, ready to build something real.

Still Syncing

As Smith suggests, our story must not be perfect—it must be true. While there will always be new skills to learn and professional milestones to reach, it is essential to remember

that regardless of our core traits, with persistence and resilience—grit before gloss—we can grow into who we choose to be. That is the art of authenticity—no need for encryption when your integrity is already end-to-end. And if you are wondering if my husband ever did take a cyber awareness course, yes, yes, he did.

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