

My Story

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Abstract

This abstract summarizes a personal narrative detailing a journey of resilience and career transformation sparked by significant life changing events. The story details after fifteen years in a stable, yet unfulfilling job, and faces a companywide pay cut. The financial instability prompts discussions about a career change, after my husband tragically suffers a fatal heart attack. Faced with profound loss and the immediate challenge of becoming the sole provider, I had to make critical decisions about my future while grieving. A hostile work environment after my return solidifies my resolve to leave a toxic work environment and outlines my initial hesitant steps back into academia at Tidewater Community College (*TCC.edu*, n.d.), where I overcome scholarly rust and the anxiety of being a non-traditional student. After a hiatus, I recommit to fulfilling my education, inspired by the high demand for women in the field of cybersecurity, receiving an Associate in Applied Science, then embarking on an academic pathway designed to merge technical expertise in cybersecurity with a comprehensive understanding of the criminal justice system at Old Dominion University, charting an unintended path for my career built on resilience and the pursuit of education in the face of adversity.

Job Complacency

There I sat, in my tiny square office with no windows, office doors that usually were open with the hustle and bustle of people coming and going, gave way to the loud silence of closed-door meetings. I sat at my desk, waiting for someone to call me into one of those meetings, to find out what was going on. It was February 2015, and I had worked for this company, in the same position for 15 years. I was in the motorcycle/recreational vehicle industry, for a small dealership that had two owners and ran as a family business. I worked in the Accounting and Titling office, where I was responsible for registering, tagging, and titling vehicles that were purchased. I also had various other responsibilities, including payroll for salespeople, online marketing, maintaining an online store, and many others. Although I cannot say I was necessarily happy at this job, I think comfortable was the best way to describe how I felt. I had flexibility in my schedule, which was important because my husband worked a lot of hours, which meant a lot of other things fell on me. After I was finally called into the office, I was told that the company was scaling back in order to survive a shut down, and that multiple employees would have their pay cut. I was shocked, angry, and at a loss for words or actions. At that time, my daughter was turning fifteen in a few weeks. I knew I needed to do something, but I did not know what that was. After discussing it with my husband, we decided that we would have to come up with a plan, but in the meantime, we really just had to scale back spending and cut corners where we could. We talked about my going back to school, in an attempt to change careers, as I only had experience in the Automotive Industry since graduating High School.

Defining Chapter

A few months after this in June 2015, my daughter had just finished her sophomore year of high school. On a Monday midday, after a weekend of nonstop softball tournaments, I was

sitting in the same small office, engrossed in my daily tasks when I got a call from my husband. I almost did not answer, as I was busy, but something told me I should answer, I did, but it was not my husband on the other end. It was a paramedic telling me that my husband was having a heart attack, and they were transporting him to the hospital. I rushed to the emergency room. When we got there, he was conscious, and I was told that he was going to be flight transported to the “Heart Hospital” because he needed extensive emergency treatment. After two weeks of never leaving the hospital to fight for him, he devastatingly passed away. The day before he passed away, I received a letter sent via UPS from my employer, stating that if I did not report back to work the following week, my employment would be terminated.

Navigating the Haze

At that point, I had to face the reality that my drastically reduced income was now the sole and only source of income. We have a teenage daughter, a mortgage, bills to pay, on top of trying to reconcile that I had suddenly lost my best friend and soul mate. I had been making medical decisions for weeks, I was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. I had not had the chance to wrap my head around what had happened, let alone begin to grieve this significant loss, and yet I had to make knee-jerk decisions instantly on what to do as far as employment. After returning to work the following week, I continued to work at the company for nine months, but I decided I had to leave. It was toxic, and I was full of animosity and resentment, my mental health had suffered significantly.

Midlife Student Experience

It was at this point; I knew I had no choice but to make major life changes. I decided I needed to further my education. It had been years since I had been in school. I was terrified,

could I do it? Would I fail? Would I be the proverbial “fish out of water” as a widow in her late thirties starting college with a mob of eighteen-year-olds? Was I crazy? I asked myself these questions incessantly, however I knew I had to make that leap, or else I was going to stay stuck in the stagnant cycle of unproductiveness. I did not know where to begin, so I applied at Tidewater Community College and proceeded to take my placement tests. I was able to go right into English 111; however, my Math skill were quite rusty. I needed to take three math essentials or pre-college preparation classes. I registered for these classes and finished the semester, then life got in the way again. It would be six more years before I found the courage and drive to redirect myself back on this path, however I knew I needed to. I had no distinct direction for what I wanted to major in, but I knew I had a small window of time before I had to decide on that, since I had to take the general education classes. At this point, my daughter had just graduated high school, so while touring colleges with her, I met an extensive group of people. I kept hearing how the field of Cybersecurity was in high demand, and a male dominated industry that needed more women to break into the field because of the skillsets woman bring to help bridge the gap in skills from diverse perspectives. This is when I decided to take that path, and in the fall of 2021, I started taking classes full time. In December 2023, I graduated Summa Cum Laude from Tidewater Community College with an Associate in Applied Science. Upon completing my Associate’s, I realized that with the transfer agreement between Tidewater Community College and Old Dominion University (*ODU*, 2023), I could get my Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity in just three semesters. I thought I should go ahead and commit to the three semesters, instead of doing it later, and taking the chance of life getting in the way again. I started my first semester in Fall 2024. During the first semester, I realized that a lot of the classes I needed to take to satisfy my major were also cross-listed classes. I discovered that I really only

needed to take two extra classes to fulfill a Minor in Criminal Justice. Despite it not being the original plan, I discovered I really enjoyed the Criminal Justice and Criminology classes, and that was the direction I wanted to go in. This leads to present day, when in twenty-five days, I will finally receive my degree, which I have worked so hard for, and I am ecstatic to see what the future holds.

References

ODU. (2023). Old Dominion University. <https://www.odu.edu/>

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