From Crisis to Curriculum: A Personal Narrative in Cybersecurity

CJ McDonald

School of Cybersecurity, Old Dominion University

IDS 493: Electronic Portfolio Project

Professor Carin Andrews

September 13, 2025

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I write as a student who turned a crisis into a curriculum. In Fall 2022, I confronted illness, missed a mathematics prerequisite, and briefly considered withdrawing from Old Dominion University. I chose a different response. By recalibrating my course load and beginning coursework in cybersecurity, I transformed a setback into the starting point of a career. The pages that follow trace that movement from difficulty to direction and explain why I intend to move from student to practitioner to professor. That story begins with why technology has always drawn me in.

How I Knew Tech Was For Me

From childhood, I imagined a future in technology. Early Computer Science courses did not immediately click, and I did not arrive with deep technical knowledge or experience, but one trait remained constant. I value disciplined learning, and cybersecurity rewards that orientation. There is always a new tool to master, a new risk to understand, and a new way to frame a problem. The more I leaned into disciplined learning, the more the field felt like the right intellectual home.

Choosing Computer Science

I entered the university as a Business Management major in Fall 2021. An early assignment in my Intro to Business course asked us to examine other disciplines and explain what drew us to them. I researched civil engineering, computer science, and architecture, seeking work that combines problem-solving with practical impact. By the end of Spring 2022, based on that research, I concluded that Computer Science was the best fit.. In my tenure as a Computer Science major, I learned some fundamentals of the coding language, C, but the more

consequential lesson concerned fit. Progress requires alignment, and when a path does not fit, one should adjust. That habit of alignment is what opened the door to cybersecurity for me.

When Everything Slipped and How I Recovered

Fall 2022 was the first time that the habit was tested. Illness at the start of the term disrupted a prerequisite mathematics course and, in short order, my broader schedule. After several weeks, I stopped attending classes and considered leaving the university. I chose adjustment rather than quitting. I reduced my spring load and, alongside a literature course, enrolled in an introductory cybersecurity course. I did not yet fully understand the field, but I was willing to begin.

That decision changed more than my schedule. Psychologist Dan McAdams distinguishes between redemption and contamination patterns in life narratives. I chose to interpret Fall 2022 as redemption, a setback that leads to growth and purpose, and that interpretive lens helped me move forward (McAdams et al., 2001; Smith, 2017). The choice to remain, to begin again in a new domain, and to show up prepared for each class reestablished academic momentum and clarified my direction.

The Class That Hooked Me

From the first meeting of CYSE 250, I recognized the fit. I wanted to attend every session, participate actively, and fully grasp the underlying concepts. CYSE 250 presents programming and networking through a cybersecurity lens, so I practiced low-level problem-solving while learning how networks carry data in the real world. One insight became clear – changing one's mind is not a failure; it is a strategy. By the end of Spring 2023, I formally declared myself a cybersecurity major. Momentum returned, and I am on track to graduate in December 2025.

Lessons From Key Courses

In Fall 2023, CYSE 201S reframed cybersecurity through a social science perspective. The course examined human factors, social and economic drivers of incidents, and the ways policy and law shape behavior. The result was a simple but durable conclusion. Security is not only about tools– it is also about people, incentives, communication, and judgment.

In Fall 2024, CYSE 280 pushed me further into practice. I configured and hardened Windows environments, planned auditing, and approached threat analysis in a structured way. The emphasis on the reasons behind each step reinforced a principle I now carry forward. Effective teaching links the what to the why. The model of instruction displayed in this course is what I hope to emulate in the future.

Lessons From Work

Working outside the classroom cultivated habits that map directly to security. As a produce clerk at Harris Teeter, a grocery store, I learned to triage problems, coordinate with a team, and remain composed under pressure. The setting differs from a security operations center, but the approach is similar. Assess the situation, communicate clearly, execute the plan, and extract lessons for the next cycle. I bring that same approach to labs, projects, and working with clients.

Learning By Doing

I can proudly say that experiential learning is what accelerated my development. In Spring 2024 and again in Spring 2025, I participated in the INNOVATE Cyber Challenge, a cohort-based team experience that applies design thinking to cybersecurity problems. I had two different teams in both years, and both teams won the competition. In the first project, my team, EncryptX, came up with a VPN service that doubled as a cybersecurity learning platform. In this

first project, I proposed the concept and helped build the website for the final showcase. In the second go-around, my team, Internet Explorers, set the goal to educate children about cybersecurity. With this new team, it was a much smaller group, so I was given more responsibility, drafting the script and helping come up with the winning solution. The process mattered as much as the result, namely showing up, listening carefully, experimenting, refining, and delivering.

This semester, I joined the COVA CCI Cybersecurity Clinic, a 15-week, faculty-mentored program that serves small businesses and public agencies that often lack dedicated cybersecurity staff. Working in teams, we are set to scope engagements, complete training exercises, interview stakeholders, and deliver practical services, including awareness training, policies and procedures, SWOT analyses, and risk assessments with actionable recommendations. The experience is consulting in practice and carries direct consequences for clients. It builds technical judgment, client communication, and disciplined documentation on deadline.

What I Bring to a Team

I have three strengths that now define my work. I learn continuously and adapt quickly. I can remain composed and solve problems under pressure. And finally, I collaborate productively with a range of personalities and perspectives. The major change after Fall 2022, the decision to restart with a new discipline, and steady engagement that followed reflect a simple practice. Read attentively, work deliberately, and ship on time. That practice extends to communication. A personal brand isn't a slogan; it is the consistent impression formed by one's skills, values, and conduct. I aim to present a consistent signal in my portfolio, my resume, and my conversations. I reduce risk and raise clarity, I learn quickly, and I help teams deliver (Montañez, 2023).

Near-Term Plans

My near-term plan is focused and measurable. I am preparing for the CompTIA Security+ certification and intend to take the exam by November. If that goes well, I plan on preparing to obtain a second certification, either CompTIA Network+ or CompTIA A+. What I do know for sure is that I'm scheduled to graduate in December 2025 with a Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity. While I complete my final courses and clinic work, I am refining portfolio artifacts so that readers can see evidence of analysis and executions rather than a list of classes.

Where I Am Headed

After graduation, I am considering two paths that align with my goals, with the same destination in mind. One option is to commission as an officer in the Air Force while pursuing my master's degree. The other is to enter civilian or government roles directly. In either case, I seek positions where I can learn quickly and contribute immediately. I still lack clarity on what exactly I want to do with my major and soon certifications, as there are an abundance of options that interest me. Security operations center roles would strengthen technical depth under pressure. Risk management and consulting roles would allow me to help organizations understand exposure and make better decisions.

In the longer term, I want to contribute where resources and clarity are often limited. Government and defense remain compelling, as do healthcare organizations and small businesses that face meaningful risk without enterprise-scale budgets. I want to be the practitioner who reduces risk and raises clarity and, in time, the professor who helps the next cohort build confident and ethical practice. One does not need to begin as the most technical person in the room to build a durable career in cybersecurity. To me, curiosity, consistency, and the willingness to adjust are equally essential.

Looking Back Looking Forward

In retrospect, Fall 2022 was not the failure I feared, but the inflection point. I revised the story I told about myself from "Maybe I don't belong in technology" to "I can do difficult things when I show up and learn," a shift that turned a setback into a turning point. Changing majors was not a detour; it was alignment. Success in two competitive projects was not an accident; it reflected habits the field demands. Joining the clinic is not a line on a resume; it is evidence that I can meet clients where they are and move them forward safely. I intend to continue building from student to practitioner to professor, one course, one project, and one client at a time.

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