

Taking a Chance: How I Found My Path in Cybersecurity

Nehemia Araia

The University of Old Dominion

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Abstract

This essay looks back at my path through college, starting as someone who had no real plan and almost left school, to finding my passion in cybersecurity and eventually working toward a career in AI security. Drawing on ideas from McAdams (2001), Smith (2017), and Nguyen (2013), I reflect on the experiences that shaped where I am today. That includes switching my major to cybersecurity at Old Dominion University (ODU), interning at Amazon Web Services (AWS) as a cloud support engineer, and working as a student security analyst at ODU's Security Operations Center (SOC). My path is what Smith (2017) calls a redemption story, where things started off rough but got better once I found something I actually cared about. Projects like an AI-powered SOC assistant and real internship experience helped me build a clearer sense of who I am professionally and what I want to do next.

Taking a Chance: How I Found My Path in Cybersecurity

A Moment at the SOC

There is a certain kind of quiet that happens in a security operations center right before something goes wrong. I have been working as a student security analyst at Old Dominion University's Security Operations Center for a while now, and I have gotten used to watching the dashboard and catching the little things that do not look right. Sitting at that desk, it is hard not to think about how different things could have been. A few years ago I was not thinking about cybersecurity at all. I was thinking about basketball. Dan McAdams (2001) says that we make sense of who we are through the stories we tell about ourselves. Looking back, my story makes a lot more sense now than it did when I was in the middle of living it.

A Life Defined by the Game

Growing up, basketball was basically my whole life. I played every day and that was kind of the plan. I was not really a school person the way some kids are. I got through high school without putting much thought into what came next. When graduation came around, I did not have a clear direction. I signed up for ODU mostly because it felt like the right move at the time, not because I had some big dream or goal in mind. I came in as an undecided major, which sounds fine on paper but in practice just meant I was floating through my first year without a real reason to be there. I did not feel any connection to what I was doing, and that started to show pretty quickly.

The Year I Almost Left

That first year was honestly rough. I was taking classes that felt random and I could not connect them to anything I actually cared about. I seriously thought about transferring. I thought about dropping out more than once. Emily Esfahani Smith (2017) talks about two kinds of stories people tell about their lives. One is a redemption story where things get better over time, and the other is a contamination story where something that starts with promise ends up falling apart. My first year at ODU was heading in the second direction. I did not feel like college was for me. Then I made the decision to switch my major to cybersecurity, and things changed a lot faster than I expected. Once I started taking those classes, I could actually see a reason to be there.

Finding the Field

Once I got into the cybersecurity program at ODU, I actually started looking forward to going to class. Old Dominion University is a public research school in Norfolk, Virginia, and the cybersecurity program gave me real, practical material to work with. Things like network security, ethical hacking, and digital forensics just made sense to me in a way other subjects never had. I also added a data science minor because I started noticing how much those two fields overlap. Machine learning and statistical analysis started changing how I thought about security problems. Instead of just thinking about blocking threats manually, I started seeing how you could make security smarter and more automated with the right tools. Nguyen (2013) describes learning as a process that expands your understanding of yourself and the world around you. That is a good way to describe what happened when I started connecting cybersecurity with data science. My whole way of thinking about problems shifted.

Building and Breaking Things

A lot of the best learning I did happened outside of class through personal projects. One I am pretty proud of is a RAG-based SOC assistant, which stands for Retrieval-Augmented Generation. It is basically an AI tool that helps security analysts quickly pull up relevant threat data and past incident information during a live investigation. Building it meant combining what I knew from my cybersecurity coursework with what I was picking up in data science, and it confirmed what I had been realizing for a while: the work I find most interesting sits right at the line between AI and security. I built AI components into several other projects as well, and each one taught me something new. Nguyen (2013) describes the ePortfolio as a “living portal” where students can use what they create to work out who they are becoming. My projects do that for me more than anything else. They show where my head has been and where I want to go.

From Campus to the Cloud

My professional experience beyond school has been a big part of shaping where I want to go. Last year I interned at Amazon Web Services as a cloud support engineer. AWS is one of the biggest cloud providers in the world, and getting to work there gave me a real sense of the scale and complexity that goes into keeping systems like that running and secure. The problems I ran into were different from anything I had dealt with in class, and I had to adapt fast to keep up with the pace. After that I came back to ODU and took on a role as a security analyst at the university’s Security Operations Center. That position is different in that it is more hands-on in a direct, day-to-day way. I am actually monitoring live network traffic, triaging alerts, and working with a team to respond to potential incidents. Having both of those experiences, one at a major tech company and one inside a university, has given me a much wider view of what cybersecurity actually looks like in real life compared to what you read in a textbook.

A Redemption Narrative

Smith (2017) argues that people who find real meaning in their lives tend to tell growth stories, ones built around working through hard things and coming out better for it. When I look at where I started at ODU compared to where I am now, that is pretty much what happened. I was close to leaving. I genuinely did not think college was going to work out for me. But finding cybersecurity gave me something to actually hold onto, and the more I learned the more I wanted to keep going. McAdams (2001) says identity is not something fixed that you are born with. It is something you build through the story you keep telling and revising about yourself. This essay is part of that process for me. I am still in the middle of writing it.

Looking Ahead

The field I want to work in is AI security. AI is being used in more places every year, including in hospitals, financial systems, and government infrastructure, and the people building those systems need to think seriously about what it means to secure them. That is the kind of work I want to be doing. Nguyen (2013) says an ePortfolio is not a finished document but something that keeps growing with you over time. I think about my own story the same way. I do not have everything figured out, but going from playing basketball every day with no plan to interning at AWS and building AI security tools is a good start. Where I am headed feels a lot clearer than where I came from, and I am genuinely excited to keep moving in this direction.

References

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