All my life I found myself fascinated and gravitated towards video game consoles which eventually turned into computers. Back when my family did not have internet or access to any game consoles, I would plead with my parents to let me stay at my cousin's house where I could play these games. This eventually even led to me staying at my cousin's place for as long as months at a time. That changed when my father brought home a PC desktop from work. You could find me there at any hour of the day besides school and afterschool programs. I was completely attached to all the possibilities that a computer and the internet had to offer. I found myself mostly playing games with friends, but I also spent some of my free time learning about almost anything I wanted to. In these earlier years, I would try digital art, making music, and dabbling in a bit of amateur programming and UI design. The downside of this endless pool of knowledge was its drastic effect on my schoolwork and studies. I began to detest having to sleep and wake up early for school. That combined with my growing resentment towards school caused my academics to plummet. This would be the trend for over half of my academic career.

During this time of my academic career, I never really felt attached to anything being taught, and felt no desire to do anything related to school. Nowhere was this more evident than in my middle school years. During this period I began to truly despise school and couldn't even bring myself to complete the most menial of school tasks. This led to my grades plummeting and my stay in after-school detention every day for three years. Even then I couldn't bring myself to work on anything laid in front of me. Despite this, I still managed to pass my middle school years with a GPA of 2.6. Going into high school, I expected much more of the same, which for most of my experiences did end up being the case. However, during one of my homeroom classes, my English teacher said in one of her many off-topic stories a tale about one of her sons who fit much of the same criteria as I had. This son of hers went into the cybersecurity field and

ended up very well off for himself despite sludging through his academic career. Needless to say, I was extremely intrigued with how this could be possible and decided that day after school to do some research into the field of cybersecurity.

As I began to research I found myself establishing connections between my previous computer activity with what cybersecurity was all about. What my friends called paranoid delusions of not downloading suspicious files and extensions, or having multiple antiviruses on at once, which I admit in hindsight now is pretty funny and completely unnecessary, were being justified. I then began to realize just how deep this rabbit hole I stumbled upon was. I learned of the millions of ways a person could intrude into a computer and how complex the concept of cybersecurity itself was. I realized then and there I wanted to pursue this as my career. No other aspect of school stuck out to me as cybersecurity and computer protection did, but I decided to trudge on through it so I could pursue this career. Through one off-hand story on a random day, I can't remember any other details of, I began my journey of turning my academic career around. I managed to end both of my freshman and sophomore years in high school with all As and made the honor roll much to the surprise and delight of my parents. In honor of my recent achievements, my parents rewarded me with a new desktop computer which I still use to this day, albeit with a few upgraded parts here and there. Near the beginning of my junior year, I was told of a place called New Horizons by my academic advisor.

While I was initially disinterested, I immediately perked up when they mentioned a cybersecurity class being taught. As I hadn't taken any real cybersecurity courses at that point I immediately wanted to apply, but was unfortunately too late. To make matters worse I realized that I currently did not meet the requirements to even join the class in the first place. My past attitude towards school was coming back to bite me in the worst way possible. However, there

was a chance to save myself. I only needed to pass one specific math class with a B requirement, which coincidentally was the math I was taking my junior year. All I had to do was pass this class and maintain my current GPA for an advanced diploma and a shot at a true cybersecurity class. During this meeting, I was also introduced to a new AP course which they had only started teaching in my school very recently. This class was AP Computer Science Principles. While it wasn't exactly what I was searching for, I believed it fit well enough as something to hold me over until my senior year. When I look back on it, my junior year was the hardest academic year I've ever had, even including my college years. I juggled multiple after-school clubs, AP classes, and SOLs (my district's version of a cumulative final for a class without even technically being a final) together while barely getting any sleep. I thought a lot about giving up and just going wherever life took me, but I managed to strive through and pass through it all, much to my satisfaction. I ended up passing all of my classes, AP exams, and SOLs, which led to me meeting the requirements for that New Horizons class along with having enough credits to gain an Advanced Diploma during my senior year.

When I think about my senior year now, it all feels like a blur to me. No thanks to a certain pandemic hitting the globe effectively cutting my final high school year in half, but I digress. This New Horizons class was not at my high school and required me to make a daily 20-minute drive to a local community college, where the building was located. Inside this two-and-a-half-hour class, I learned a multitude of things, most of which I had a general understanding of previously but was deepened. This class, while further solidifying my desire to pursue a career in cybersecurity, also allowed me to gather a few certifications along the way which would help me later on down the road. It was also in the class that I was persuaded by my professor to enroll in Old Dominion University, as it was one of the current leading colleges in

Cybersecurity. That class, while technically being one of the hardest classes I was supposed to have taken at that point, felt like such a breath of fresh air that I barely even noticed it, and I ended up passing the class with an A along with all of my senior year classes. I had managed in four years to bring my GPA from 2.6 to 3.7 just from a random one-note story from a random English teacher on a random day. I then began my journey at ODU.

My first two years at ODU were as you expect, a mix of general education classes with a few tiny aspects relating to my major. I had breezed through most of these classes but found myself hitting an unexpected roadblock. Those were the programming classes I was required to take. My AP Computer Science Principles class gave me a brief introduction to rudimentary coding, but I hadn't experienced actual coding or the C++ language at that point. Despite these roadblocks, I persevered through and passed all of my classes. My junior year of college began the actual trek toward obtaining my degree. As Cybersecurity is an interdisciplinary studies type degree in ODU, it required a lot of different classes from different courses and viewpoints, many of which I hadn't experienced or expected at that point. While this was another initial roadblock, I believe it helped me in the end. These classes and interdisciplinary studies allowed me to gain a deeper experience and understanding of my career.

This leads me to where I am now. As I'm writing this I'm currently in the first semester of my senior year of college still pursuing a degree in Cybersecurity with an added minor in Computer Science scheduled to graduate with both in Spring 2024. If I could go back in time to any point in my life I believe I'd do it all over again, with a few minimal changes to have made it easier on myself like anyone would. Though I don't think I would change much of anything. When I think back about that story I believe it's the main reason I'm currently typing this in the first place. While I believe I still would have gone into Cybersecurity it might have taken me

longer and potentially could have gotten to a point where I couldn't make it through high school. While I had my disagreements with that teacher and many others down the road, I'm still grateful for their guidance. I managed to bring myself back from a pit of depression and academic numbness into a future I and those around me can be proud of, and for that, I feel nothing but satisfaction and excitement for what my future holds.