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New Beginnings: A Personal Narrative

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## ABOUT ME

I was born at the turn of the century; the year 2000. Being raised alongside the rise of the internet, it was inevitable that I'd be a part of the first generation immersed in modern technology from an early age. However, I didn't come from a tech-savvy family, so it was up to me to figure out the ins and outs of the devices in the house if I wanted the best out of it. I remember tearing apart and upgrading components from an old, cheap laptop I told my parents I needed for school, just to play online with friends. Although my journey began with a focus on healthcare, my passion for technology provided a deeper sense of fulfillment. Little did I know that what started as a creative outlet for me would eventually help me reshape my career trajectory. It was at Old Dominion University that I turned this lifelong passion into a pursuit and major in CyberSecurity.

## EARLY ACADEMICS

I spent my early academic years studying the world of biology thinking I could follow in the footsteps of my successful biochemical engineer uncle in the pharmaceutical industry. Staying on track for pharmacy school had its ups and downs, but I would always find myself pulled back to technology. In the summer, I would attend coding camps at the local community colleges. I would return when I entered high school to teach middle school children how to program using Lego's NXT kits and how to work as a team through competitive challenges. It was not the easiest task, but it was worth seeing their creativity shine. With the money I earned, my friends and I would go on to build our own computers; finally being able to afford to discard our cheap attempts at high-end gaming systems. The idea of turning these passions into a career was still not apparent to me, but just as a pastime away from the books. I went on to graduate

from high school while earning my associate's degree at Lorain County Community College in the spring of 2018.

## CHALLENGES AND TURNING POINT

My parents did not graduate from college nor had an abundance of resources to get me through the system, so the pressure for me to succeed academically was overwhelming, to say the least. In conjunction with my studies at Bowling Green State University, I worked at a student cafe; juggling schoolwork and traditional work for the first time. It was instilled in me from a young age that if I wanted something, I had to earn it and that time management was key. However, because of the 2020 pandemic, my career plans took a different path. Many other students and I were sent away from the campus to slow the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Many of us struggled to find a way to reconnect with family that hadn't planned to see us back so soon. Due to family issues, I also had to move to a new state. Away from my friends, and memories.

Switching to online courses required more self-motivation than I had, given the state of the world and my uncertainty about what tomorrow would bring. The final blow came when I found out that the pharmacy school where I had aligned my prerequisite studies had lost its accreditation. The same work accepted for one school does not always transfer well to another. In one fell swoop, all of my hard work was cast aside, setting me back to square one and forcing me to find a new pharmacy school to enter.

In 2021, I decided to take a break from school to gain real work experience. I thought, "If I am to enter the healthcare industry, I should at least find an easier way to get some real

experience”. My new motivation directed me to become a certified pharmacy technician. However, I soon realized the gap between my expectations of healthcare and reality.

Even after working for a few months, the position did not bring me the satisfaction I had hoped for. Don’t get me wrong; I am very proud of the service I provided, but the role felt forced onto me. Despite everything inside screaming at me to throw in the towel, I continued the job because I knew it was preparing me for something. I just didn’t know where or when it would arrive.

Over time I began taking a step back and noticing the little things that were bringing back that missing sense of purpose. Whether it was setting up new systems or reporting technical conflicts, I was finding more joy in sorting out technical issues at work rather than being a healthcare provider. Because the world of healthcare strives to make their services more accessible, there are many attempts to bring our services to the digital world; however, I would see a growing frustration with the older clientele that are not acquainted with the complex intricacies of the cyber world. I recall a shift where a patient expressed frustration with our online portal system. In situations like this, I am eager to take the time to be thorough in resolving what may be wrong or explaining how the system is to be used. I think with the mindset, ‘If I am thorough today, this won’t be a problem tomorrow’. My efforts were noted by my coworkers; praising me for my ability to show patience. I was happy to step outside of my pharmacy technician role to help and this sparked a realization that my true calling was in technology, not in pharmaceuticals.

I didn’t necessarily have a grandiose “aha” moment but more of a realization that I could make what I’m already used to a career. I reached out to my old friends and they would share

their recommendations on going into IT and computer science careers. Despite the support, I would continue to doubt my abilities; downplaying my ability to perform to some arbitrary comparison of what I think an IT specialist can do. What I think helped me change my perspective was a heart-to-heart conversation with my aunt who works in IT about the difference between a career and an occupation; leading me to go for what I felt more at home in.

### PRESENT DAY

I expressed my curiosity about the new career path and was encouraged by coworkers to check out Old Dominion University, and by the spring of 2023, I enrolled. Ever since my academic journey has aligned much better with my interests than my previous attempts to pursue pharmacy. This time, I was driven by a renewed sense of purpose. Beyond my studies, I continued the theme of staying involved in my community by volunteering for the Gencyber summer camp, where I helped middle schoolers discover the world of coding and cybersecurity. Helping young students unlock their creativity and gain confidence in their abilities reminds me of how far I've come and reinforces my passion for the field. I still enjoyed seeing that spark of creativity in others when they understood the fundamentals. I have also improved my time management skills while continuing to improve the health of my community behind the counter. I will be excited for the day I can claim victory and find a position in my true passion.

## REFLECTIONS

I resonated with Celeste Nyguen's findings that through narratives, we can assess our educational lives and prior notions to reach a higher understanding (Nyguen, 2013). Without retelling our story, our lives can seem like a random sequence of events with no direction. I also recall a psychology lecture by Dr. Jordan Peterson on the mapping of meaning that through the process of self-authoring and dividing our lives into major events, we can find what it is that we want and what we want to avoid (Peterson, 2017). It was because of these teachings that I began journaling my journey.

Even though pharmacy did not end up being the final goal, I agree that all things happen for a reason and I am grateful for the lessons it has taught me. Working in such a high-pressure environment where mistakes have critical consequences pushed me to develop emotional resilience and stress management skills. One challenging situation I recall to this day involved a distressed mother who had called to refill her son's seizure medication. However, this was around the time the national insurance processor, Change Healthcare, had shut down due to a ransomware attack, leaving the mother worried about how she would afford to care for her son as our systems were no longer connected to her insurer. If I hadn't been guided by the amazing women I worked with behind the counter, I wouldn't have the skills I have today. Being able to balance customer care and technical troubleshooting under intense pressure is a worthy feat that I am proud to experience. Without that experience, I would not have matured the way that I did.

One of the first lessons the women instilled in me was, 'This is not a summer job; it is a commitment'. This advice reminded me of how I used to look at occupations. The careers you choose in the adult world are not always a one-size-fits-all, choose one you are willing to give

your all to. The effort you put out into the world should be sincere; time is valuable and you should be putting the most into it. These experiences ensure me that I can survive anything.

## LOOKING AHEAD

As I move forward, I'm focused on pursuing a federal position that will allow me to use technology creatively and make a real difference. I believe I have the skills to bridge the disciplines of cybersecurity and public service and contribute to societal missions. Although my career focus has changed, I feel that finding another fast-paced environment would keep me more engaged. I would love to find a position in the digital forensics side of cybersecurity someday.

## CONCLUSION

Part of finding my new trajectory was taking a step back and seeing the reality beyond what was in front of me. The internet has always been a second home to me—a way to keep in touch with the friends I moved away from, a creative outlet, and where my curiosity always led me. On this journey, I learned that in dire times, I can step outside of myself to resolve any situation and that strengths and weaknesses are shaped by what is required of you and what you're willing to give.

### Citations

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