Personal Narrative Essay

Ethan Lasich

Old Dominion University

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Professor Carin Andrews

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Uncertainty About the Future

During my senior year of high school, there was a lot of pressure to decide what the future of my education would be, however unlike many of my friends who were sharing what colleges they applied to and what their career goals were, I still had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. The amount of choices was overwhelming and I felt like I was looking at a fork in the road with no time to decide which path I would take. At the time, I was somewhat sure I wanted to work in a field involving computers, but even with that in mind, it didn't feel like I had a clear idea of what I wanted to do.

Discovering Cybersecurity

Growing up, I had always enjoyed messing with computers, starting at a young age, with a Windows 2000 PC in my basement. Some of my favorite memories from that time included playing flash games and surfing the internet, and over time these interests evolved and became more technical, where I started messing around with virtual machines, building computers, and even soldering screen mods onto some of my Gameboys. When choosing my senior-year electives, I ended up picking a variety of classes related to these interests gravitating towards programming and cybersecurity. Ultimately, the one class that got my attention that year was an introductory cybersecurity class, which covered the basics of the field and also introduced me to a new side of computing, with topics such as Linux and capture the flags. I started to consider it as a potential career path, but filled with uncertainty and running out of time to decide, I ended up applying to Northern Virginia Community College so I could take more time to figure things out while taking advantage of lower tuition costs to explore my options.

During that summer, I worked at a driving range where I was allowed to wear my headphones on the job. I took advantage of this privilege to listen to music and podcasts, but

with my cybersecurity class leaving me wanting to learn more, I ended up searching for podcasts that related to the industry. That's how I found the show "Darknet Diaries" hosted by Jack Rhysider, and once I started listening I was hooked. I spent several hours every shift listening to him talk about crazy stories involving pentesting, security breaches, the dark web, bug bounties, and more, and within a few months I had finished every episode. Darknet Diaries truly opened my mind to how exciting the field of cybersecurity could be, and with that in mind, I declared my major at NVCC as Cybersecurity and started taking classes in networking and IT basics.

Studying For Certifications

After my second semester at Northern Virginia Community College, I was informed that passing a networking class had qualified me for the CompTIA Network+ exam voucher, fully funded through an ACE Credentials program at my school. Initially, I thought it was a good opportunity, but felt as if I wasn't ready enough, however I decided this wasn't something I could turn down and accepted it with a skeptical mindset. As I got closer to the exam though, I committed to studying seriously, and in the few weeks before, I spent all my time watching Professor Messor and Mike Meyers Network+ training videos, and also doing practice exams days before the real thing. When I finally took the exam, I was so nervous and unsure of if I would pass or not, but when I finally got to the end, I was relieved to see I actually passed! Through the same program a few months later, I earned another voucher or the CompTIA Security+ exam. That time, I took it more seriously from the start, knowing I was capable of passing it, practicing the same study techniques that helped me with the first certification. In November of 2023, I got to take the exam, and despite being nervous going into it, by the end I was confident I had passed before even getting to the results screen. At just the beginning of my second year in college, I could proudly say I had two CompTIA certifications on my belt.

Choosing a Four Year University

Towards the end of my community college journey, I started considering where I wanted to transfer to when my two years there were up. For most of that time, I was pretty certain I wanted to go to George Mason University, however when looking at what my associates degree would transfer into, I was pretty disappointed, as the program was a Bachelor's of Applied Science with only a concentration in cybersecurity. This led me to look for other options where I eventually discovered Old Dominion University and their dedicated bachelors degree in cybersecurity. I looked through their course curriculum and decided it would be the best choice for me and in August of 2024 I moved to Norfolk to continue my education at ODU.

Hands On Experience at the COVA Cyber Clinic

While at Old Dominion, I received an email about an internship opportunity for the spring semester called the COVA Cyber Clinic, which was a program within ODU that offered cybersecurity consulting to small businesses for free, while also providing students with hands-on experience in the cyber field. Since I needed an internship to graduate, I decided to apply, and after months of waiting I received an email a week before my spring semester offering me a spot in the program, which I happily accepted. While working there, I was assigned to a group with 2 other students, and we were paired with a small business called TJS Financial Solutions. During the rest of my time there, my group and I met with the owner of the business multiple times, assessing her current cybersecurity measures and providing recommendations for improvement. At the end of the program we gave her a detailed powerpoint presentation with a checklist of steps she could take to keep her company safe and secure. The owner was super grateful with our work and the sense of pride and accomplishment knowing our work made a tangible impact will always be a highlight of my journey.

Conclusion

As I prepare for graduation in December 2025, I enjoy looking back on how far I have come. Cybersecurity has brought me on a journey from an uncertain highschooler, to somebody who is able to share his knowledge with small business owners to make a difference in the world. As I look to the future and prepare to start my career, I'm excited to see where cybersecurity brings me next.