

**Personal Narrative: Changing with Changes**

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IDS 493: Electronic Portfolio

Professor: Carin Andrews

September 13, 2025

## **The Path**

This writing is about me and my journey to becoming who I am today. As I continue to grow personally and professionally, I have discovered that thoughts about wants don't necessarily align with the reality of those desires after they have been realized or gained. Many times, I've made decisions I thought would bring me closer to what I wanted in the professional and personal aspects of my life, only to discover what I thought I wanted was not aligned with my true self. I have worked in many different capacities which required a variety of skills ranging from technical to communication-based or a combination of both. As I have been growing as a person, I've realized that to really know what speaks to me when it comes to my professional purpose, I must go out into the world and face things head on to discover how they align with me. Becoming a Cybersecurity student at Old Dominion University has been part of this process of discovering my true calling in the professional world.

## **The Security Mindset**

Cybersecurity was not always something that I was interested in. My first exposure to anything cybersecurity-related was from my best friend who worked his way up from pulling cables for network installations in doctor's offices to working in a Security Operations Center (SOC) for Salesforce. Through his time doing this he would talk about some of the things he was doing, and I was fascinated.

I initially began my understanding of security practices when I became an intelligence analyst for the U.S. Army. Much of what we did required us to be on classified networks with strict adherence to security protocols. The training around these security protocols always inspired me to think about how to circumvent them as a thought exercise, since I have a tendency

to think in that manner. When someone says it can't be done, I like to think about how it could happen.

Eventually, I became the security manager at one of the units I was stationed at during my time in the Army, and it required me to go through formal training on many different things related to classified networks and physical locations. This training was my initial foray into understanding security best practices and how they could be defeated.

### **My First Steps at ODU**

After I finished my enlistment in the Army, I did some defense contracting at the Terrorist Explosive Device Analytical Center (TEDAC) for the FBI at the Quantico forensics lab. I utilized my analytical skills acquired as an intelligence analyst in the latent print unit of TEDAC, helping to research and find individuals who built IEDs from around the world.

As interesting as this work sounded, it became repetitive with limited results. Most prints lifted off of the IED components had little, if any, information associated with a person in a database. This position made me begin thinking about my next move and pushed me to change what I was doing. I decided to attend ODU.

I initially began attending ODU in the mid-2010s. I wanted a change and to do something different, so I began a civil engineering degree with a concentration in construction management. This was initially quite interesting, and I had a lot of motivation to learn and acquire the knowledge to become a construction manager.

While I was attending ODU, my father had a stroke that disabled him to the point where he could barely walk and was unable to speak or hold conversations anymore. I decided to drop out of my program to go and take care of him.

## **Returning With Purpose**

After I left to help take care of my father, I began working for a roofing company. I learned a lot about the residential roofing industry, including many facets of home improvement, interior and exterior. This experience helped me understand more about myself and what I wanted. I realized that being on roofs and coming home from work exhausted from the heat was not something I wanted to do long term. I also realized I didn't want my income potential to rely on how the weather was going to be for the day.

I eventually started to look for something different and landed a job in outside sales for one of the biggest roofing and exterior material suppliers in the United States. This work was challenging since I had little sales experience. I learned how to interact with people in a sales and marketing context, but it wasn't something I enjoyed much. The people in the building trades could be very challenging at times, which sharpened my interpersonal communication skills. I eventually moved on to a roofing company where I worked in project management and estimating.

During this time, I developed back issues from years of abuse being airborne in the military and working on roofs. This became quite debilitating for me. I started to think about long-term work for the future which didn't require as much physical strain. I decided penetration testing in the cyber world was something that really spoke to me. I had always been good with technology and computers, and by then my people skills had developed quite well.

I attended a course program designed for veterans and secured a spot in Divergence Academy's professional penetration tester program. While attending this academy, I accelerated my learning about computers and learned a substantial amount about compromising systems

through hacking and penetration testing techniques. I graduated from the academy and earned my CompTIA Security+ certification.

This was a great step, but I knew I needed more credentials. The only work I could find at the time was working for Dell as a warranty hardware replacement technician. That position was valuable for learning the hardware side of things, but I wanted more. I saw that ODU was offering a degree in cybersecurity, and I felt like this aligned well with my skills as an intelligence analyst and my recently developed skills in penetration testing. I signed up to attend and secure a BS in Cybersecurity, which was long overdue.

### **Conclusion**

Looking back, my journey has been defined by change, resilience, and the constant drive to discover where I truly fit. From my time in the Army, where I first encountered the importance of security, to working in the building industry that tested my adaptability and people skills, I've gained a broad foundation that I now see coming together in Cybersecurity. Every step, even the painful ones that seemed like detours, has sharpened me as a person and taught me something essential about myself.

Choosing cybersecurity at ODU represents the alignment of my skills, passions, and long-term goals. The technical side excites me, the problem-solving challenges me, and the opportunity to protect and defend systems gives me a sense of purpose. I also believe my people skills I have developed are going to prove beneficial when having to communicate with stakeholders. My personal brand is built on persistence, adaptability, and the ability to bridge technical knowledge with strong interpersonal skills.

As Nguyen found, "Students reconfigured their past in the ePortfolio, and integrated their imagined future through an ongoing process" (Nguyen, 2013, p. 143). That is exactly what I am

doing: refiguring a career shaped by the Army, construction, and sales, into a future built on Cybersecurity. “Even making smaller story edits to our personal narratives can have a big impact on our lives” (Smith, 2017, para. 3). Returning to ODU was one of those key story edits for me.

## References

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- Emily Esfahani Smith. (2017, January 12). *The two kinds of stories we tell about ourselves*. Ideas.ted.com; ideas.ted.com. <https://ideas.ted.com/the-two-kinds-of-stories-we-tell-about-ourselves/>