

Personal Narrative Essay

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Personal Narrative Essay

Introduction and Personal Background

Hello, my name is Samantha Hairston, and I am currently a student at Old Dominion University in the Perry Honors College, graduating May of 2026 with a Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity and a minor in Cybercrime and Criminal Justice. When people see my academic focus today, they often assume my journey here was straightforward. In reality, my path has been shaped by resilience, self-discovery, and unwavering determination to never let obstacles define my limits. My story is not only about technology and cybersecurity, but about perseverance, compassion, and drive to help others.

From a very young age, I was known as the caring one. My grandfather, who has three other granddaughters, always referred to me as the caring granddaughter. I was the child who wanted to help, who noticed when others were struggling, and who felt fulfilled by offering support in any way I could. That sense of empathy has stayed with me throughout my life and continues to influence both my academic and career goals.

Early Educational Challenges and Misdiagnosis

My early educational experiences were not easy. In kindergarten, I was held back after my teacher told my parents that I was too immature to move on to the next grade. Confused and concerned, my parents sought professional guidance to understand what was happening. I was soon diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). At the time, this diagnosis seemed to explain everything, but years later I would learn that it was a misdiagnosis that shaped much of my childhood.

Growing up, I often felt out of place. I was older and taller than my classmates, and I was frequently asked why. I never knew how to answer honestly. I carried a deep sense of

Personal Narrative Essay

embarrassment about being held back in kindergarten, especially when others would ask how someone could be held back so early. That shame followed me quietly through my early school years and made me feel different in ways I could not yet explain.

Living With Narcolepsy and Finding Answers

By the time I reached fifth grade, things became more difficult. I was no longer taking ADHD medication, and I began experiencing overwhelming exhaustion during the day. I would fall asleep in class despite trying my hardest to stay awake. One teacher even yelled at me for sleeping, when I explained that I could not help it, she asked if my mother knew. She did. My mom had already tried everything, including having me read and write myself to sleep at night. Doctors continued to dismiss the issue, telling us it was normal for children to be tired.

Everything changed during the summer when I finally saw a neurologist. Within minutes, he told me that I had Narcolepsy Type 1. For the first time, I had an answer.

Narcolepsy Type 1 is a chronic neurological condition that affects the brain's ability to regulate sleep and wake cycles and can significantly impact daily functioning. According to *What It Takes*, Narcolepsy Type 1 can make life feel exhausting and unpredictable, as it involves a range of symptoms beyond persistent tiredness. These symptoms include excessive daytime sleepiness, sudden muscle weakness known as cataplexy, disrupted nighttime sleep, sleep paralysis, vivid dreamlike experiences that occur when falling asleep or waking (What It Takes, n.d.).

Collectively, these symptoms can take substantial toll on both physical and emotional wellbeing, making it difficult to manage daily responsibilities, maintain academic performance, and participate in social activities (What It Takes, n.d.).

Growth, Resilience, and Academic Transformation

Personal Narrative Essay

With the correct diagnosis came proper treatment. I began taking sleep medication and eventually a stimulate medication that helped regulate my wakefulness. That medication was Adderall, the same medication I had taken years earlier for ADHD. This explained why I had not shown strong narcolepsy symptoms before. The medication allowed me to stay awake, reduce cataplexy episodes, and finally live a normal and productive life.

The change was immediate and life changing. My grades improved, and I began taking honors courses and later Advanced Placement classes in high school. I was finally able to see my capabilities reflected in my academic performance. I had always been a hard worker, but now I could stay awake long enough to show it. Determined to never feel left behind again, I graduated high school in three years, skipping a grade so I could graduate with my original class.

This experience shaped who I am today. I am an extremely hardworking individual with strong determination. I have a neurological disorder, but I refuse to let it limit what I can accomplish. My friends, family members, mentors, and managers recognize this quality in me, but it was first cultivated by my parents and sister, who were my biggest cheerleaders.

Discovering My Passion for Cybersecurity and Law Enforcement

When it came time to choose a university, Old Dominion University stood out to me. My mom spoke about how beautiful the campus was, and after touring it myself, I knew it was where I belonged. Initially, I applied as a political science major because my dad believed I would make a great lawyer due to my determination and passion for advocacy. However, during my campus tour. My guide spoke about her experience as a cybersecurity major and mentioned connections to federal opportunities. That conversation sparked my curiosity.

Personal Narrative Essay

Growing up, I watched crime shows with my dad, and we would analyze cases together and try to solve them before the show revealed the ending. One of my favorite shows, *Criminal Minds*, featured a technical analyst who used technology to track suspects and uncover digital evidence. I researched the role and learned that it required a cybersecurity degree. Soon after, I changed my major to cybersecurity and added two minors which are cybercrime and criminal justice.

Academic Focus and Hands on Learning at Old Dominion University

My coursework has reinforced that I chose the right path. Some of my favorite classes include Windows Systems Management and Security, Linux Systems for Cybersecurity, Social Science and Crime Mapping, and Basic Cybersecurity Programming and Networking. I thrive in hands on learning environments where I can actively apply concepts and solve real world problems.

Professional Experience and Technological Innovation

Securing an internship in cybersecurity was challenging due to the competitiveness of the field, but I remained persistent. I eventually earned an internship at ODU Brooks Crossing Innovation Lab as a Makerspace Technician. Although the role was not strictly cybersecurity focused, it was deeply rooted in technology and innovation. I operated, maintained advanced equipment, and taught community members how to use it.

This internship aligned perfectly with my entrepreneurial background. Since the age of sixteen, I have created custom products using vinyl machines, sewing machines, and embroidery equipment. My supervisor Mrs. McCoy later wrote a recommendation letter highlighting my creativity, professionalism, enthusiasm, and eagerness to learn.

Purpose, Values, and Career Aspirations

Personal Narrative Essay

My passion for law enforcement and cybersecurity is rooted in care. I want to help solve crimes not simply to reach conclusions, but because each solution brings justice, closure, and peace to someone. Helping others has always been central to who I am, and that value continues to guide my career goals.

Reflection and Portfolio Overview

Looking back on the past three and a half years, I am proud of what I have accomplished. I have earned recognition on the Dean's List, remained in Honors College, and overcome personal and academic challenges. I know that my future holds even more opportunities for growth and impact.

This portfolio serves as a reflection of my college career and the growth I have experienced throughout my academic career. It demonstrates the projects, coursework, and hands-on experiences that have shaped my skills in cybersecurity, cybercrime, criminal justice, and technology. Through this collection of work, you will see not only my technical abilities, but also my improvement, adaptability, and commitment to continuous learning. Each artifact represents a step forward in my development as a student, professional, and problem solver, highlighting the dedication and determination that defines who I am and the future I am working toward.

AI assistance from ChatGPT was used on 01/28/26 to help with organizing ideas.

Reference Page

Living with Narcolepsy Type 1 I WHAT IT TAKES for Patients. (2025). WHAT IT TAKES Patient Site. https://www.whatnt1takes.com/living-with-nt1?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_term=Narcolepsy%20sleep%20schedule%20type%201&utm_id=22919479905-189937507168-