

From Curiosity to Cybersecurity: Building a Future with Purpose

The First Time I Felt a Sense of Belonging

I distinctly remember when a professor wanted a custom virtual machine configured for students, a sandbox for building websites with Docker. It was not just an assignment; it was a chance to consolidate the technical skills I had learnt over the last few semesters and translate them into action in a way which had tangible repercussions. With metered flexibility in mind and so setting up the environment and automating its deployment, I finally got to witness how the students operated on it. That moment made me feel empowered and proud, in which I actually belonged in the realm of cybersecurity and system administration.

Today I'm a System Administrator and a senior in my Bachelor's in Cybersecurity at Old Dominion University. What I do matters, I take pride in what I do because I know a cybersecurity professional is the linchpin in the plan to keep information that is sensitive and private safe. To me, being a cybersecurity professional is about dedication to the integrity and safety of data; being the invisible barrier between people and bad actors. It also means remaining grounded and ethical in a constantly changing world. But as technology becomes more ingrained in daily life, the stakes are higher. It's not just about firewalls and passwords, it's about trust. That's what I tell myself, especially on tough days. I'm not merely addressing technical problems. I am protecting people's livelihoods, their identities, their businesses and their peace of mind.

When You Start to Lose Motivation and Purpose

But this is not where my story began. I didn't always know this was what I wanted to do. At first, I was interested in coding. I had a general idea that working with computers was of interest, but I didn't know what my place would be. This left me feeling lost and unmotivated in school. I did feel like I was lost during that time, just doing stuff without having to actually reach the goal. I even considered changing my major completely at one point. I wasn't failing, but I wasn't excited. The projects seemed remote, and the lectures didn't strike a chord with me. The whole time I was thinking, "Is it really true? Is this what I want to do for the rest of my life?" That kind of doubt can sound loud, and it was.

That started to shift when I began reaching out to people I didn't know such as mentors, professionals who majored in different subjects, and people who were further along in their careers. From those conversations, I began to realize just how big the tech world truly is. I discovered that computer science wasn't my only option. I started to hear

more about cybersecurity, that it wasn't just about technology, but about strategy, defense and ethics. That's when I knew I had discovered my calling. Cybersecurity provided something deeper, a sense of purpose.

I was particularly interested in the notion of ethical responsibility in tech. In other parts of computer science that are heavily development-focused, you get to think about code. Cybersecurity is asking you to think about consequences. To get a glimpse behind the curtain, read about two distinct aspects of cybersecurity here. It forces you to balance risks and rewards. It introduces human behavior and psychology and trust. That dimension was everything for me.

My Experiences — The Building Blocks of My Identity

When I changed my major from computer science to cybersecurity, my classes began to reflect who I had become. But I wasn't formed solely by school. Through internship experiences and hands-on projects, I learned to reach beyond myself. Writing infrastructure for a whole class with Terraform and Docker wasn't an enlightening exercise, it was a case of real life. It showed me how to think critically, automate systems, and always think about scalability. But there were times I failed, or faced problems I couldn't resolve immediately. But those moments gave me something even more valuable than technical skills: in the midst of those failures, I learned resilience. I got comfortable asking for help, doing the deep research, owning the problem until there was a concrete solution.

Tools like Ansible, Proxmox and oVirt are an entire world of their own when it comes to system orchestration. It was fun to optimize processes and save hours of time in the long run. That experience made me understand that cybersecurity isn't just about defense, it's also about building systems that are efficient and secure by design. I was not simply patching holes — I was building better ships. From these experiences I began to recognize a theme: It was curiosity that drew me in, persistence that saw me through, and adaptability that enabled course changes when necessary. According to McAdams (2001), causal coherence in life stories gives an insight into how one event leads to another. Today more than ever I see that clearly. Every moment of uncertainty or transition brought me to this moment. And then everything changed when I started looking at obstacles as part of the journey instead of roadblocks of failure. I began to feel pride in the debugging, in the research rabbit holes, in the adrenaline high of finally cracking the code after days of spinning my wheels. That's where the confidence developed, not from perfection, but walking through failure.

A Redemption Story

Smith (2017) notes that we often narrate our lives through narrative frames of redemption or contamination. A redemption story turns suffering into meaning, failure into purpose. That's how I see my journey. At first, I was lost, floating through school like a fish in the desert. But with time, each experience fell into place, each conversation contributed to a bigger picture, and each new challenge turned into an opportunity. I transitioned from confusion to clarity.

Working on my electronic portfolio helped me visualize that arc more clearly. As Nguyen (2013) argues, building a portfolio forces students to understand experiences that they may have neglected or dismissed. Looking back through my projects, internships, and classes helped me realize how much I had grown. It reminded me that every single moment I pushed forward, was another step to who I am as a professional, today. It also helped me envision new possibilities for my future, things I didn't even think about before. It was rewarding to see how an uncomplicated concept (effecting VM automation) could truly become a helper to professors and students alike. It reminded me that behind every script I write, behind every terminal command, there are people who benefit. That people aspect makes the work rewarding in ways that I had not anticipated.

Looking Forward: The Future I'm Creating

Post-graduation, I hope to find a position that is truly of interest to me, but I wish to continue learning as well. I'm aware the tech world is never static, and neither can I be. From new programming language paradigms to cloud security best practices to the latest threat models, I'm always looking to scale up in both skill and responsibility. I see my professional self as a DevOps engineer in five years. This position combines my system administration experience with automation, security, and infrastructure. It's not merely a technical role, it's a creative one, where problem solving intersects architecture. My story has prepared me, training me on the power of curiosity, encouraging me to pursue new tools, reaffirming the need to be flexible. I've learned that each and every skill I master can be a bridge to my next job.

I want to work in an environment that balances innovation with integrity — that embraces experimentation without sacrificing accountability. To give guidance back, the same way in which someone did for me, leading people in their own drives of doubt and discovery. And perhaps most importantly, I have learned that I can build something meaningful, not just for myself, but for the users and communities I serve. My path hasn't been flawless, but it has been intentional. And that, I think, is the kind of story we want to be living.

Zavier Basnight
IDS493
4/13/25

References

1. McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100–122. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>
2. Nguyen, C. (2013). ePortfolios and the development of professional identities in higher education. In R. E. Griffin, B. W. Hunter, & C. H. M. Williamson (Eds.), *Advances in Higher Education and Professional Development (AHEPD)* (pp. 1–18). IGI Global.
3. Smith, E. R. (2017). Redemption and contamination stories in the construction of identity. *Narrative Inquiry*, 27(2), 253–270. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.27.2.04smi>