

Ilyssa Monroe's Inspiring Journey Into Cyber Security



Growing up in Florida, Ilyssa Monroe didn't have a clear pathway to a tech career. Computers were rare, and her childhood computer—a boxy machine on dial-up—was more for games and basic website experiments than anything else. But even with these limited tools, Ilyssa's curiosity grew. "We had those really boxy computers," she laughs, recalling early memories with tech. "If I had to go back and use one right now, I'd probably scream because they go so slow."

Though her interest in technology continued, life soon took over. Ilyssa became a young mother and entered the workforce, taking on various roles to support her family. Yet, her passion for computers persisted.

Education

- Bachelor's in IT
- Master's in Cybersecurity

Career Path

- Started as computer enthusiast
- Returned to school at 20
- Studied while working and raising family
- Graduated with dual degree
- Currently seeking cybersecurity position

Key Experience

- National Cyber Security League Participant
- Cyber Security League Scholarship
- Excelsior University Dual Degree

A Chance to Pursue a Dream

At the age of 20, Ilyssa returned to school for an administrative assistant certification. It was then that she remembered her continued interest in IT. Later, while working at Pizza Hut, she learned about their partnership with Excelsior University. They offered numerous programs and affordable tuition in various fields including cybersecurity. She immediately recognized an opportunity to join a field she had long been interested in. "I wanted to know how computers worked, how you could program them. I wanted to understand everything about it."

In 2018, Ilyssa enrolled in Excelsior's dual degree program with intentions to earn both a bachelor's in IT and a master's in cybersecurity. She was excited yet aware of the hard work ahead, as she balanced being a full-time employee, student, and mother of six. Regularly waking up at 3:00 a.m., she'd study before her kids rose for the day, showing her commitment to her family and her future.

Overcoming Personal and Professional Challenges

The journey was anything but easy. While living in Florida, she and her husband decided to move the family to Colorado, a transition that came with unexpected obstacles. "We had jobs lined up, but our rental fell through, and we ended up living and working as hosts at a campground in Moffat before moving to Cañon City, where we spent a month and a half in a pop-up camper with the kids in tents." Despite these hardships, Ilyssa remained focused on her goal.

Her dedication paid off, and she continued advancing in her studies, even participating in the National Cyber Security League.

This competition became a pivotal moment for her, both in experience and confidence. "The biggest struggle was working full-time, making sure all my kids were getting to school, and still finding time to study." But Ilyssa didn't give up, motivated by the knowledge that every step brought her closer to a career in cybersecurity.

A Lifelong Love for Learning

While the technical aspects of cybersecurity fascinated her, Ilyssa's real passion was the constant need to keep learning. The National Cyber Security League competition taught her the fast pace of the industry, and her essay for the competition earned her a \$5,000 scholarship to help cover tuition costs. "You're always learning. The cyber threat landscape is constantly changing, and that's what keeps me engaged."

Since graduating, Ilyssa has stayed active in the cybersecurity community, continually learning through online research and networking events. "I don't want to be a lifelong student, but I know things change so rapidly in this field that you're constantly learning," she reflects. It's this passion that has kept her on her journey, even in the face of challenges.

Building a Future in Cybersecurity — For Herself and Her Family

Still without a role in cyber security, as she applies for cybersecurity positions, Ilyssa has also become a role model to her children. Her eldest son, who took a robotics class at a young age, has joined an IT program at his high school in Cañon City, and the two recently collaborated to rebuild her computer together. "It's really special to share something like this with him," she shares proudly.

Looking forward, Ilyssa dreams of securing a position that challenges her daily without the pressures of being in upper management.

"I want a career where I can keep learning and never get bored. I'm not looking to lead a department, but I want to find myself in a position that keeps me challenged."

Embracing New Challenges

Reflecting on her journey, Ilyssa says the biggest takeaway is her newfound confidence in her ability to learn and adapt.

“The biggest takeaway from all of this is knowing that I’m capable of continuous learning. I love this field, and I’m excited to see where it will take me next.”

Her story is a powerful reminder that it’s never too late to pursue a dream. Through perseverance, love for learning, and commitment to her family, Ilyssa has transformed her life and set an inspiring example for those around her.

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