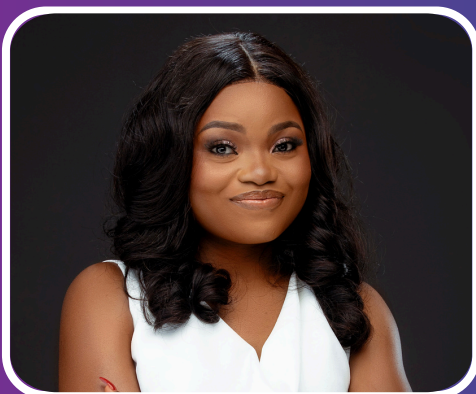




# WICYS STORIES

A Compilation of  
Life-Changing Stories  
TOLD BY THE WICYS COMMUNITY





# A Compilation of Life-Changing Stories TOLD BY THE WICYS COMMUNITY

Welcome to the launch of the **“WiCyS Stories”** series, celebrating the life-changing impact of the WiCyS community and recognizing the backgrounds and achievements of its members.

Since its inception, the **Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS)** organization has served as a beacon of empowerment, creating pathways for women to build life-changing careers in cybersecurity. With a mission to recruit, retain and advance women in the field, WiCyS offers mentorship, skill development programs, critical networking opportunities, events and resources that empower women and allies to enter the cybersecurity realm and thrive within it. Driven by a vision of a strong cybersecurity workforce, WiCyS fosters an environment where everyone feels empowered to reach their full potential.

Each narrative in this collection highlights the resilience and success of women at various stages of their careers—from military spouses and veterans transitioning into cybersecurity to professionals on non-traditional career paths and students and faculty expanding their horizons. With the unwavering support of the WiCyS community and the vital role of our Strategic Partners, these women have reached remarkable milestones and embraced transformative opportunities. Together, these stories illustrate the power of community and mentorship, showcasing our collective commitment to strengthening the cybersecurity workforce.

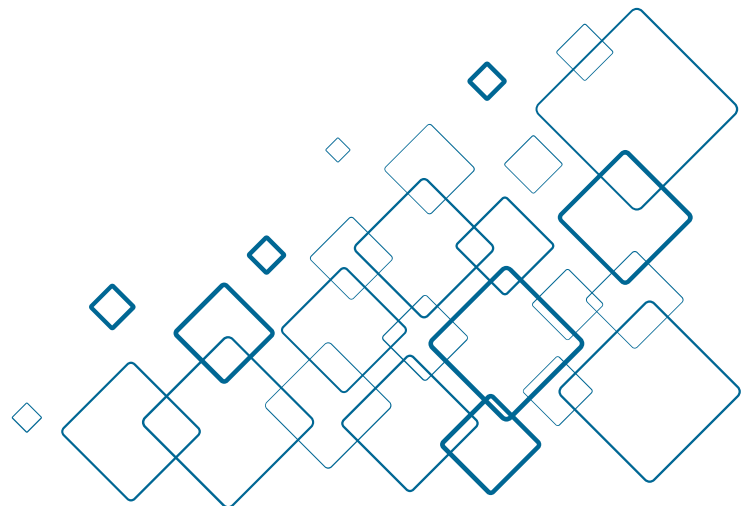




# WiCyS Stories

## VETERAN & MILITARY

Driven by a shared mission to protect, many veterans, military personnel and their spouses find a natural career path in cybersecurity. We share their stories here, showcasing their challenges, triumphs and the role WiCyS plays in their professional growth.



# Hannah Rapetti's Journey to Empowerment in Cybersecurity



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"In the cyber realm, where a 'good ole' boys' club' has traditionally prevailed, WiCyS stands out as a **beacon of change**, fostering a supportive and inclusive atmosphere led by women. It's reshaping the cybersecurity landscape, providing a network where I no longer feel dependent on traditional channels. Instead, I can lean on the relationships cultivated through conferences and programs. It's empowering to be part of this **transformative movement**, where a diverse group is leading the way forward."

**Hannah Rapetti**

*Cyber Security Analyst, Proofpoint*



In the vast world of cybersecurity, building a solid career foundation can feel like navigating an overwhelming labyrinth of certifications, degrees and resources. Hannah Rapetti, a former librarian, military spouse and graduate of the WiCyS Security Training Scholarship Program, found a path to success illuminated by the guiding light of Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS).

As a military spouse, Hannah faced unique obstacles in her career journey, often feeling constrained by circumstances beyond her control. She had reluctantly shelved her own aspirations to adapt to the unpredictable rhythm of military life, uprooting whenever duty called. Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the nomadic lifestyle inherent to being a military spouse, Hannah found herself standing at a crossroads, yearning for a career trajectory she could cultivate rather than continually restart.

WiCyS emerged as a transformative force in Hannah's professional narrative, offering her a renewed sense of purpose and a roadmap for her career transition. It served as a beacon of empowerment, facilitating a seamless shift into cybersecurity and providing her with a supportive community where her contributions were valued and recognized.

The WiCyS Security Training Scholarship was instrumental for Hannah, offering tailored programs that honed her cybersecurity expertise, bolstered her confidence and networking skills and propelled her toward career advancement opportunities she had once deemed unattainable. The sense of camaraderie and inclusivity within WiCyS resonated deeply with Hannah. In an industry often perceived as a "good ole' boys' club," WiCyS offered a refreshing alternative—a supportive "good ole' girls' club" where women uplifted and empowered each other.

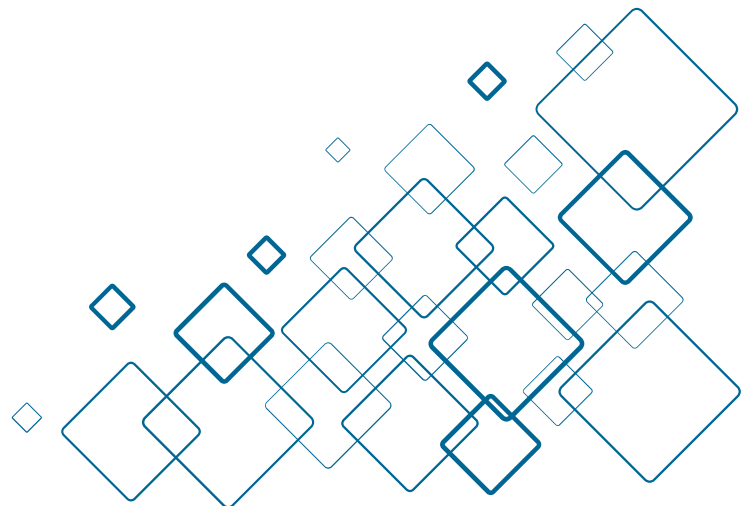
Hannah's career breakthrough coincided with her early participation in the WiCyS Security Training Scholarship Program. A month into the program, she landed her current role as a Cyber Security Analyst at Proofpoint. As she progressed through the WiCyS program, earning certifications and leading her division to victory in the conference CTF, she shared her achievements with her employer. This resulted in a promotion and raise—a recognition of her

# Hannah Rapetti's Journey to Empowerment in Cybersecurity

dedication and newly acquired skills. Her success was celebrated at a company town hall, where she was highlighted with a dedicated slide showcasing her accomplishments and WiCyS's impact on her professional development.

This exposure expanded her network, connecting her with professionals who eventually became colleagues and enhancing her team's capabilities. WiCyS empowered Hannah to reject imposter syndrome and step into new roles, even being invited to share her story and expertise as a panelist at conferences. Overall, WiCyS has not only provided tangible career benefits but has also opened doors to various opportunities, enriching Hannah's professional journey in multifaceted ways.

As Hannah reflects on her journey with WiCyS, she emphasizes the importance of seizing opportunities and embracing resilience. She encourages women to push past their fears, knowing that every rejection is a stepping stone toward growth and success. Her story serves as a testament to the transformative power of the WiCyS organization in breaking barriers and advancing women in the industry. With each stride forward, Hannah embodies the limitless potential of women in cybersecurity, fueled by the unwavering support of the WiCyS community.



## From Military Service to Cybersecurity: A Veteran's Path to Success



“WiCyS has played a crucial role in *shaping my career journey*. After completing the WiCyS Veterans' Apprenticeship Program, I launched my career at Bloomberg, marking the beginning of a rewarding path in cybersecurity. Three years later, this career has provided for my family beyond my wildest dreams and has empowered me to achieve more than I ever thought possible. If you look up *'tenacity'* in the dictionary, you'll find me right there!”

**Jenny Graham**  
*Vulnerability Analyst, Bloomberg*



Jenny Graham's venture into cybersecurity epitomizes resilience and determination. As an Army veteran and former Military Police Officer, Jenny has navigated life's challenges with unwavering tenacity. Her journey demonstrates the power of seizing opportunities and the profound impact of community support.

Starting her career in the Army as a Military Police Officer, Jenny's transition to cybersecurity was far from straightforward. Armed with pre-med and forensic psychology degrees, she initially considered careers in forensic histology or criminal forensics. With the onset of COVID-19, Jenny faced difficulties securing employment despite her qualifications. After exploring various avenues and networking tirelessly on LinkedIn, Jenny's introduction to the Veterans to Work organization highlighted her potential in cybersecurity. Encouraged by the results of an aptitude test, Jenny boldly chose to pursue this unexpected career path.

Her path took a decisive turn when she discovered WiCyS online. She thoroughly researched the organization before applying for the 2022 WiCyS Veterans' Apprenticeship Program. This program prioritized qualifying female veterans, addressing the disproportionate challenges faced by the demographic compared to their male counterparts, including higher rates of unemployment, single parenthood and homelessness. Accepted among 400 applicants, Jenny felt destined for the opportunity to carve her niche in cybersecurity. The program's rigor tested her, yet her military background equipped her with the resilience to persist. Bonding with fellow participants over shared challenges, Jenny found a supportive network that was instrumental in her career trajectory.

Jenny's first WiCyS conference left a profound impact. She was struck by the strong sense of community dedicated to empowering women in cybersecurity, where even male allies played a supportive role. To Jenny, WiCyS represents more than just acquiring skills and advancing a career; it embodies the profound connections and meaningful influences that shape lives.

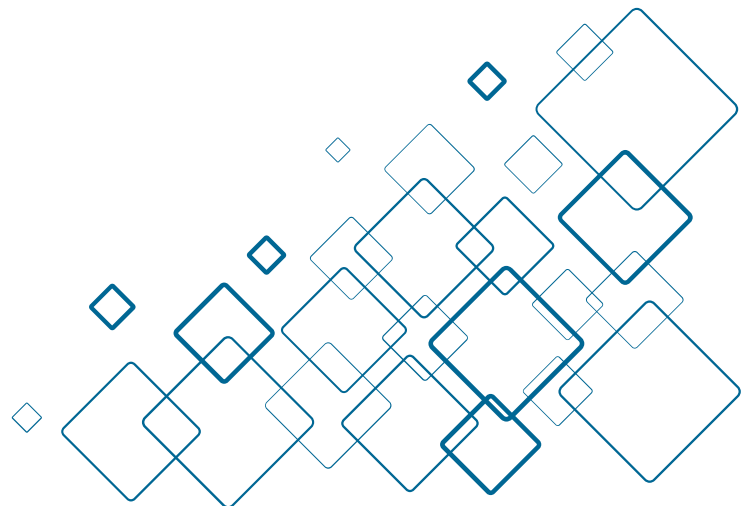
Jenny credits WiCyS for playing a vital role in her success, accelerating her career in ways she hadn't imagined. After completing the apprenticeship program, Jenny was one of two veterans

## From Military Service to Cybersecurity: A Veteran's Path to Success

chosen to interview with Bloomberg. She secured a position as a vulnerability analyst and faced the steep learning curve of starting at a high level in a new field. Despite the challenges, Jenny flourished and, three years later, continues to excel at Bloomberg.

Jenny remains committed to supporting other women in their careers, inspired by WiCyS's ongoing evolution in nurturing successive generations of women in cybersecurity. She believes in the power of women to make a difference in the field and encourages others to pursue their dreams, emphasizing that diversity and inclusion are essential for innovation.

By investing in and supporting women entering the cybersecurity field, WiCyS aims to guide them toward rewarding careers, offering the financial independence they deserve for their hard work and dedication. Thanks to her resilience throughout the Veterans' Apprenticeship Program, Jenny now enjoys this success. With a lucrative career in cybersecurity, she can now comfortably support her children and enjoy financial freedom. Through the support of WiCyS, Jenny found a successful career and a diverse community of women and allies that empowered her to achieve her dreams.



## Barbara Golson's Journey to Belonging in Cybersecurity



“WiCyS transformed my cybersecurity journey in ways I never expected. From my very first Capture the Flag competition in 2023 to my second in 2024, I **gained the confidence** to analyze threats, think critically under pressure and truly own my place in this field. Through mentorship, hands-on opportunities and the unwavering support of a community that empowers and uplifts, **WiCyS helped me see that I belong in cybersecurity**, that I am capable, that I have a voice and that I can not only succeed, but thrive.”

**Barbara Golson**  
*IAM RBAC Analyst, Ascension*



Barbara Golson's path to cybersecurity didn't follow a traditional route, but her journey was defined by resilience, reinvention and relentless determination. After serving eight years in the U.S. Air Force and spending more than a decade in IT service management, Barbara had built a solid technical foundation. Still, pivoting into cybersecurity later in her career brought unique challenges: navigating a male-dominated industry, keeping pace with a rapidly evolving field and finding a community that truly understood her ambitions.

That community came in the form of Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS), a network that empowered her, connected her with like-minded professionals and helped her confidently take the next step in her career. Barbara first heard about WiCyS through a recommendation from someone in her professional circle. What started as curiosity soon led to a life-changing transformation. "WiCyS completely changed my cybersecurity journey from my first Capture The Flag (CTF) in 2023 to my second in 2024," Barbara shared. "It gave me the confidence to analyze threats, think critically under pressure and most importantly, to believe that I belong in this field."

At the time, Barbara had just completed an 11-month intensive cybersecurity defense program through the University of Central Florida, gaining hands-on experience in DFIR, network and cloud security and Python. But it was WiCyS that helped her bridge the gap between education and real-world application. "The CTF pushed me beyond what the classroom could offer. It was intensely hands-on. I had to break things, identify what was wrong and fix it—all while working under pressure. It reinforced everything I had learned and pushed me to think more strategically."

What resonated with Barbara most was the spirit of support she found in the WiCyS community. "Even in the midst of a competition, people were willing to give you that nudge or word of encouragement when you needed it. It was never about being the smartest person in the room; it was about growing together. I met incredible women whose journeys were similar to mine, and others whose paths were completely different, but we all shared the same goal: to thrive in cybersecurity."

## Barbara Golson's Journey to Belonging in Cybersecurity

A pivotal moment in Barbara's journey came when she received a scholarship to attend the 2025 WiCyS Conference in Dallas. "It was like receiving a golden ticket," she said. "The conference was more than just a professional development event; it was a place where I saw what's possible for women in this field. The panels, hands-on workshops and networking opportunities were game-changing."

Hearing other women share their paths and challenges helped Barbara see the value in her own story. "Everyone has a different journey, and hearing those stories reminded me that there's no one way to succeed in cybersecurity. That realization was powerful."

Following the conference, Barbara refined her focus and gained clarity in her career direction. She realized much of her previous work had already involved identity and access management (IAM), giving her a clear sense of where her skills and interests aligned. After reworking her resume to highlight those skills, she landed a new role in IAM at Ascension. "I had been applying for so many jobs, getting rejections and second-guessing myself. But WiCyS helped me stay persistent and believe in what I bring to the table."

Barbara went on to earn her CompTIA Security+ and ISC2 Certified in Cybersecurity (CC) certifications, achievements she now uses to support others on their own paths. For Barbara, WiCyS was not only a stepping stone in her career; it ignited a passion to give back. She now mentors others studying for the Security+ exam and holds regular training sessions to support their certification journeys. "I know how overwhelming it can be to break into cybersecurity. I want to help others the way WiCyS helped me."

She's also making an impact in her local community. Living in a senior-populated neighborhood, Barbara reached out to her HOA to host cybersecurity awareness sessions for older adults. "I want to educate them on phishing emails, suspicious phone calls and digital safety basics. I even connected with AARP to include their resources in my presentations."

When asked to sum up what WiCyS means to her, Barbara didn't hesitate: "WiCyS means empowerment. It means being encouraged, owning your power and knowing you're not alone in this journey. It reminded me that it's never too late to start something new or to keep growing. Especially as women in cybersecurity, we have to lift each other up, build our skills and keep pushing forward."

Now, as she pursues her CYSA+ certification, Barbara carries with her the same relentless spirit that brought her into this field. Supported by a strong community and grounded in her own hard-earned experience, she is proving that the journey to cybersecurity can be as unique as the women who make it, and that resilience, reinvention and determination are the keys to breaking barriers.



# WiCyS Stories

## INDUSTRY PROFESSIONAL

The vast and ever-evolving cybersecurity industry requires skilled professionals to secure networks, develop policies and defend against cyber threats. In this section, we feature the stories of established professionals, highlighting their experiences and leadership. We illustrate how WiCyS fosters career advancement, mentorship and community.



## How **Mariami Kentchadze** Built a Community and Found Empowerment Through WiCyS



“WiCyS has been a *defining force in my cybersecurity journey*, providing me with opportunities that have shaped my career and strengthened my confidence in this field. Through WiCyS, I've been honored to participate in incredible programs that expanded my skills, broadened my network and *fueled my drive to innovate and empower others*. Most importantly, being part of this global community has deepened my gratitude for the unwavering support and inspiration that WiCyS provides to aspiring cybersecurity professionals around the world.”

**Mariami Kentchadze**  
*Cybersecurity Specialist & Professor*



Opportunities have the power to shape our future in unexpected ways, and Mariami Kentchadze's journey is a perfect example. As an international student from the country of Georgia, she overcame societal barriers to carve her own path in cybersecurity. Through her involvement with Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS), Mariami expanded her technical skills, built a strong network and fueled her passion for innovation. Her story highlights how embracing opportunities can transform not only your own future but also open doors for others.

Mariami's passion for technology and security led her to pursue a degree in cybersecurity at Utica University. Moving to the United States came with unique challenges—from adapting to a new culture to navigating career opportunities in the U.S. cybersecurity industry. However, she quickly recognized the power of community and mentorship in overcoming these obstacles.

Mariami's journey took a pivotal turn when Professor Leslie Corbo—Utica University's Director of B.S. Cybersecurity Programs and an active WiCyS member—introduced her to the organization. Inspired by Professor Corbo's leadership and WiCyS's dedication to advancing women in cybersecurity, Mariami eagerly joined the community as an active member. Surrounded by supportive women in tech at Utica University, she quickly stepped into a leadership role, launching a WiCyS student chapter on campus to further the mission of recruiting, retaining and advancing women in the field.

Mariami saw the need for a dedicated space where women and underrepresented students in cybersecurity could network, collaborate and thrive. When presenting her case to the university's recognition committee, she faced initial skepticism about the necessity of a separate cybersecurity organization.

However, she made a compelling argument that the WiCyS chapter would encourage female participation in cybersecurity, contributing to the broader goal of breaking down barriers and strengthening the cybersecurity workforce. Her vision resonated with the committee, and the chapter was unanimously approved by all the voting members—a milestone in her mission to build an empowering community on her campus.

# How **Mariami Kentchadze** Built a Community and Found Empowerment Through WiCyS

"What I love about universities in the U.S. is that even if the opportunity doesn't exist, you are afforded the space and opportunity to create it," Mariami shared, reflecting on how she transformed an idea into a space for empowerment and growth with the support of fellow students and faculty members who believed in her.

As the newly appointed WiCyS Student Chapter President, she set to work refining the chapter's constitution, organizing engaging events and generating excitement among her peers. Her leadership was driven by a deeper purpose: creating opportunities for others, especially women in tech, who often lack the support they need to advance in the field.

Growing up, Mariami was often told that she was destined to achieve less than her male counterparts in STEM fields. Despite her computer proficiency and identical performance across technical and non-technical subjects, a teacher once suggested she pursue a different career path, claiming she was not suited for a technical field.

While many of Mariami's teachers were supportive and believed in her, one teacher—someone she admired—left a lasting mark with a single comment. As she explained, "Even a single discouraging comment can have the power to redefine your perspective, alter your future decisions or shake your confidence—if you let it. Instead, rise above and refuse to let these comments dim your light or make you doubt what you're capable of achieving." Rather than holding her back, moments like these only strengthened Mariami's resolve to challenge stereotypes and empower other women in STEM.

"I've always wanted to do something that would empower others," she explains. "Especially because I have sisters and young cousins—I don't want anyone taking away their sparkle." This passion drives her commitment to fostering an inclusive environment where everyone has the chance to succeed.

Mariami's involvement with WiCyS opened doors to numerous opportunities that enriched her cybersecurity journey. "Through WiCyS, I've been honored to participate in incredible programs that have shaped my career and given me the confidence to push forward," she said.

She seized every opportunity to grow her skills and expand her network, participating in prestigious programs such as the Security Training Scholarship, the Mentor/Mentee Program, the ISC2 Fall Camp and the renowned Target Cyber Defense Challenge.

The Target Cyber Defense Challenge was particularly defining. She finished in the top 10 and had the opportunity to present her findings to Target's cybersecurity team. The experience validated her skills, boosted her confidence and reinforced her place in the industry.

Mariami's success has deepened her appreciation for being part of a global community that uplifts aspiring cybersecurity professionals. Now, she is eager to share her experiences and inspire the next generation through her presentation on neurocrime in the digital age, which has been selected out of thousands to be heard at the upcoming WiCyS conference.

## How **Mariami Kentchadze** Built a Community and Found Empowerment Through WiCyS

“I’m excited to see everyone and present my work,” Mariami shares with a smile. “With WiCyS, I genuinely feel like I’ve found what I was searching for throughout my career. I want to empower others to pursue their dreams and do what makes them happy.”

For those considering a career in cybersecurity, Mariami’s advice is simple: get involved. Seek out communities like WiCyS, take advantage of mentorship programs and don’t be afraid to create opportunities where they don’t yet exist.

Her story is a testament to the power of seizing opportunities, pushing past barriers and creating spaces where others can succeed. Through WiCyS and her unwavering determination, Mariami isn’t just building a career in cybersecurity—she’s shaping the future for those who follow.



## Breaking Barriers & Forging New Frontiers: **Annie Jamshed's** Trailblazing Cyber Journey with WiCyS



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“From establishing the first WiCyS student chapter at the University of Houston to founding the WiCyS Houston affiliate, my commitment to **empowering women in cybersecurity** has remained steadfast. Through partnerships and leadership roles, I've strived to break barriers and create opportunities for women in this male-dominated industry. WiCyS has not only shaped my career but has also **fueled my passion for mentorship and advocacy**, ensuring that every woman has the support and resources needed to succeed in cybersecurity.”

**Annie Jamshed**

*Security Architect, JPMorganChase*



Annie Jamshed's venture into cybersecurity is characterized by a pioneering spirit and a determination to overcome challenges. As the first in her family to explore this field, she faced skepticism initially. However, Annie found motivation in skepticism, viewing each obstacle as an opportunity for growth and personal development. Her story is one of breaking barriers and shattering preconceived notions, deeply intertwined with the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization, which has significantly shaped her career and inspired her to support the next generation of cybersecurity professionals.

Annie earned her bachelor's degree in electrical engineering in 2012 from Bahauddin Zakariya University in Punjab. In 2016, she moved to Houston, Texas, to pursue a master's degree in information system security at the University of Houston. Eager to delve into the field, Annie noticed a lack of female role models. A friend's introduction to the WiCyS conference piqued her interest. With support from her mentor and professor, Dr. Conklin, she secured funding to attend her first WiCyS conference in Chicago in 2018. This experience was transformative, exposing her to a network of like-minded individuals and industry leaders. Seeing women from diverse backgrounds share their knowledge inspired Annie, reinforcing the belief that her dreams were attainable. The supportive environment at WiCyS became a cornerstone in her professional development, instilling confidence and a sense of belonging.

Recognizing the absence of WiCyS student chapters, Annie seized the opportunity to create the first one at the University of Houston. She sought to provide a platform for aspiring women in cybersecurity to learn, collaborate and grow together. Even after graduating with her master's degree in the Spring of 2018, Annie remained committed to shaping and mentoring the chapter. Her drive to break new ground and defy conventional limitations embodies her commitment to forging her own path and inspiring others to follow.

Annie's dedication to WiCyS extended beyond her university years. Upon joining SLB as an SOC Analyst, she leveraged her experience with WiCyS to establish a strategic partnership between SLB and WiCyS with the goal of utilizing the WiCyS Job Board++ and the Virtual Career Fair to bridge the gender gap in cybersecurity roles. As her tenure at SLB solidified, Annie sought

# Breaking Barriers & Forging New Frontiers: **Annie Jamshed's** Trailblazing Cyber Journey with WiCyS

avenues to support cybersecurity professionals, leading her back to WiCyS. Amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Annie founded the WiCyS Houston affiliate in 2020, serving as President for three years. Her leadership and passion for WiCyS fueled efforts to organize events, mentorship programs and workshops, empowering women in cybersecurity at the professional level.

In 2022, Annie's career took another significant leap when she joined JPMorganChase as a Security Architect. This role presented fresh challenges, including adapting to the company's organizational size and structure and overcoming a steep learning curve. Nevertheless, Annie navigated these challenges adeptly, building trust with product teams and emphasizing the importance of diverse perspectives and inclusive collaboration in cybersecurity. Continuing her involvement with WiCyS, she discovered an existing partnership between the organization and JPMorganChase. She assumed leadership of the working group and later established a WiCyS corporate affiliate, showcasing her dedication to advancing women in cybersecurity. Annie remains a staunch advocate for diversity and inclusion at JPMorganChase, leveraging her experience and network to drive positive change within the industry.

Annie's journey serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration. From being the first in her family to pursue a degree in electrical engineering to establishing the first WiCyS student chapter, she embodies the spirit of breaking barriers and forging new paths. WiCyS played a pivotal role in Annie's personal and professional growth, offering exposure to female role models and a sense of belonging within the cybersecurity community. Her story powerfully emphasizes the indispensable role of mentorship and support in navigating a male-dominated field. Moreover, it underscores her dedication to furthering the WiCyS mission of recruiting, retaining and advancing women in cybersecurity.

Annie's steadfast commitment to empowering women in cybersecurity shines through her dedication to serving as a role model for future generations. Through her visionary leadership and relentless drive to create opportunities for other women, she has not only propelled her own career forward but also paved a path for others to follow. Annie remains resolute in her mission to innovate and uplift, ensuring a brighter future for women in cybersecurity through her ongoing commitment to paying it forward. As she continues to champion women in the field, her legacy will inspire countless others, motivating them to pursue their passions and defy conventional limitations.

## From Injury to Innovation: **Andrea Frost's** Rise in Cybersecurity and the Role of WiCyS



“WiCyS has been a community that made me believe in my potential and my place in cybersecurity. The 2015 conference was a turning point that gave me the **confidence to step out of my comfort zone** and pursue my passion with purpose. Now, I am dedicated to giving back and **supporting the next generation** of women in cybersecurity, ensuring they have the same opportunities and encouragement I received.”

**Andrea Frost**  
*Senior Software Security Engineer,  
Dell Technologies*



Andrea's path to cybersecurity is as unique as it is inspiring. With a Bachelor of Arts in German Language and Literature from Western Washington University, she graduated in 2003 without a clear career direction. Instead of pursuing a position related to her degree, she embraced the life of a "ski bum," spending winters skiing and snowboarding while working in restaurants and firefighting during the summers.

However, a trip to India and Nepal changed everything. Andrea developed an illness that left her sick for two years and she simultaneously needed multiple surgeries on her foot after a work injury. As her physical abilities diminished, so did her lifestyle. Faced with a dire situation, Andrea moved back in with her mom and began searching for a new career path that could provide stability.

In her early 30s, Andrea returned to school. She chose to pursue computer science, drawn by the field's promising job opportunities and financial prospects. As she immersed herself in her studies, she discovered a growing interest in cybersecurity. Despite her passion, Andrea often felt isolated in her master's program due to the lack of diversity, particularly the scarcity of women in her classes. This sense of isolation motivated her to seek out conferences and communities where she could connect with others in the field.

It was through a graduate advisor that Andrea was introduced to the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization. In 2015, she applied for and received a student scholarship to attend the second annual WiCyS conference in Atlanta, Georgia—a turning point in her journey.

At the conference, Andrea found herself surrounded by positive messages of belonging and encouragement. The conference speakers emphasized the need for diverse backgrounds in cybersecurity and assured attendees that there was a place for everyone. This boost in confidence led Andrea to connect with a recruiter from Ionic Security at the career fair, who encouraged her to apply for a cybersecurity role. Despite feeling like a "fish out of water," Andrea took the leap, crafted a resume and landed her first cybersecurity job as an Analytics and Data Science Engineer at Ionic Security. She embraced the opportunity, moving 3,000 miles away from home and gaining invaluable experience during her year there.

## From Injury to Innovation: **Andrea Frost's** Rise in Cybersecurity and the Role of WiCyS

Andrea's career trajectory continued to rise after her first WiCyS conference. At another tech conference, she reconnected with WiCyS Founder Dr. Ambareen Siraj, sharing her job success and expressing her gratitude for the WiCyS student scholarship. This led to an invitation to speak at the 2016 WiCyS Conference in Dallas, Texas, where Andrea delivered a lightning talk titled "Nobody Expects the Spanish Inquisition." The talk, inspired by Monty Python and the movie "Sliding Doors," highlighted how seizing opportunities can significantly alter one's career path.

Andrea graduated with her Master of Science in Computer Science from Western Washington University in 2017 and now works as a Senior Software Security Engineer at Dell Technologies. While her team is predominantly male, Andrea finds immense support and inspiration from the WiCyS community. She values the inclusive and encouraging environment at WiCyS conferences, which energizes her and has allowed her to build a strong network of other women in the field. Her involvement with WiCyS has shown her the value of diverse perspectives in solving cybersecurity challenges. Based on her experiences, she believes prioritizing students and industry newcomers is essential to bridging the cybersecurity workforce gap.

Now, having attended the annual WiCyS conference for nine years, Andrea's journey has come full circle as she pays it forward through her involvement in the WiCyS Career Growth Hub. She played a significant role in creating this "hub" at the annual conference, where she and other volunteers provide resources such as resume review, mock interviews, professional headshots and career conversations to help newcomers and industry professionals navigate the cybersecurity field. Reflecting on her own experience of landing her first job at a WiCyS conference, Andrea aims to offer the same confidence and support she received, ensuring future generations of women in cybersecurity have the tools they need to succeed.

As Andrea continues to inspire and mentor the next generation, she embodies the spirit of WiCyS—where diverse backgrounds and experiences are not only welcomed but celebrated. Her story highlights the critical need for inclusivity and support in cybersecurity, paving the way for a future where everyone, regardless of their background, can contribute to solving the industry's most pressing challenges.



## Betta Lyon-Delsordo's Journey from Self-Taught Coder to Cybersecurity Professional



“My first WiCyS Conference was a *turning point in my career*. It showed me that I didn't need decades of experience to share valuable insights. The connections I made, the skills I gained and the confidence I found there *transformed how I approach my career*. Today, I'm mentoring others, sharing knowledge on LinkedIn and preparing to present at the next WiCyS Conference, which is an opportunity I had never imagined before attending. WiCyS is redefining what's possible for me and so many others in the cybersecurity field.”

**Betta Lyon-Delsordo**

*Application Penetration Tester, OnDefend*



The path to a cybersecurity career is rarely straightforward, and Betta Lyon-Delsordo's story demonstrates how stepping beyond your comfort zone can lead to incredible growth. Now an accomplished Application Penetration Tester at OnDefend, Betta reflects on her journey from self-taught coder to cybersecurity professional, crediting much of her success to her involvement with the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization.

Growing up in Montana, where tech opportunities were sparse, Betta's passion for technology began at just 13. With limited guidance, she taught herself to code and, by high school, was participating in coding competitions and building websites for women entrepreneurs in her community. Her interest in cybersecurity emerged when clients sought advice on improving the security of their businesses, such as blocking bot traffic and managing passwords. Recognizing the importance of secure development, Betta delved into application security and ethical hacking, laying the foundation for her career.

Her academic journey mirrored her determination. She earned a bachelor's degree in computer science at the University of Montana, completed an internship with an ethical hacking firm and went on to pursue a master's degree in cybersecurity from Georgia Tech. In the final semester of her master's program and while working in her first penetration testing job, Betta took a leap of faith and applied for a scholarship to attend the WiCyS Conference—a decision that became a turning point in her career.

“I didn't know what to expect,” she recalled. “But when I arrived, I saw women presenting cutting-edge research, sharing career advice and genuinely connecting. It was unlike anything I'd experienced before.” For the first time, Betta felt a true sense of belonging in the cybersecurity world. The conference taught her the value of both in-person interactions and staying connected online to share opportunities. By networking and leveraging LinkedIn, she discovered how much easier it was to find job opportunities. This strategy ultimately helped her secure her second position much faster, as recruiters began reaching out to her directly on LinkedIn.

## Betta Lyon-Delsordo's Journey from Self-Taught Coder to Cybersecurity Professional

A workshop on LinkedIn optimization further reinforced these lessons. By strategically engaging with the cybersecurity community online, she expanded her LinkedIn network from fewer than 1,000 to over 7,000 connections in just one year. Betta's increased online visibility led to new career opportunities, including her current role at OnDefend, where she secured a significant salary increase.

Beyond networking, WiCyS ignited Betta's desire to give back. "WiCyS made me want to become more of a mentor," she shared. Today, she dedicates her time to mentoring junior colleagues, coaching girls' coding teams and encouraging others to pursue cybersecurity careers. While mentoring others, Betta continues to rely on the guidance of her own WiCyS mentors, embodying the organization's spirit of continuous support.

The conference also gave Betta the confidence to dream bigger. Initially hesitant, she submitted a proposal to lead a workshop at WiCyS, encouraged by a fellow attendee who saw the value in her expertise. Her proposal was accepted, and she is now preparing to present at the next WiCyS Conference with her talk titled "Hacking AI: Easy As Pie!"—a milestone that reflects her growth and determination.

Reflecting on her journey, Betta acknowledges the profound impact of WiCyS. "I feel like there's a WiCyS member at every place I might work, and we'll find each other," she said. The camaraderie, mentorship and opportunities within the WiCyS community not only shaped her career but also instilled in her a passion for lifting others as she rises.

From a self-taught coder in Montana to a cybersecurity professional on a national stage, Betta's story exemplifies the transformative power of community, mentorship and embracing new challenges. Her journey highlights the extraordinary possibilities that emerge when we lean into support networks and push beyond the familiar, unlocking a future filled with potential.



## Arlyssa Jaquez's Mission to Leave Cybersecurity Better Than She Found It



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When you find a true passion, it becomes natural to want to share the process, the work, the stories and help others along the way. **For me, WiCyS has provided that space**, not only to deepen my cybersecurity knowledge but also to connect with like-minded professionals and build a meaningful network. As a member of WiCyS, **there's no shortage of inspiration or opportunities**. It's a place where everyone is eager to lift each other up and make a lasting impact, and that's something I'm proud to be part of.”

**Arlyssa Jaquez**

*Cybersecurity Architect, Verizon*



As a Cybersecurity Architect at Verizon, Arlyssa Jaquez has spent over a decade building her career in an industry where women remain vastly outnumbered. But it was her involvement with Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) that helped her find a supportive network, a sense of belonging and new opportunities for growth. Today, Arlyssa's mission to leave cybersecurity better than she found it continues to inspire and empower the next generation of security professionals.

Arlyssa first discovered WiCyS in 2015 while working at Lockheed Martin. Though the organization was still in its early stages—and departmental budgets limited her ability to get involved—she kept WiCyS on her radar. “I would get the newsletters and look through them,” she recalls, “but I didn't have the opportunity to attend a conference back then.

That changed when Arlyssa transitioned into her role at Verizon, a prominent WiCyS Strategic Partner. Verizon's leadership, including male allies, actively encouraged employees to engage with WiCyS—a gesture that left a lasting impression. “They were like, ‘Please join; you need to be part of this,’” she said. Encouraged by their support, she attended her first WiCyS Conference virtually in 2020, during the height of the pandemic.

But it was the 2023 WiCyS Conference in Denver that marked a turning point. Experiencing the event in person and being surrounded by a community of women passionate about cybersecurity ignited a deeper connection. “That was my ‘wow’ moment,” Arlyssa said. “I really wanted to do more for the organization.” The camaraderie, teamwork and genuine desire to uplift one another made her feel instantly at home.

Motivated to contribute, Arlyssa joined the WiCyS Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) Affiliate and quickly stepped into a leadership role as Marketing Chair. Her impact was immediate. She helped organize events, expanded affiliate communications and led a six-week cybersecurity learning series, collaborating with Verizon leaders to offer valuable programming for aspiring professionals.

## Arlyssa Jaquez's Mission to Leave Cybersecurity Better Than She Found It

She also spearheaded the launch of a dedicated Slack channel for WiCyS DFW members, fostering deeper community connections. Members use the platform to support one another's certification journeys and share job opportunities. "Whenever someone messages me on LinkedIn about cybersecurity or certifications, I try to shift them into our Slack group. It's about building community beyond a single message," she explained.

Arlyssa's dedication to giving back didn't stop there. After earning her CISSP certification in 2023, she began leading CISSP training groups within the DFW affiliate to help others achieve their own certification goals. Her motivation is grounded in a philosophy she first heard from WiCyS keynote speaker Blakely Wall: "Don't just join to take. Join to give." That message struck a chord. "Every time you're doing something, it should be, 'How can I serve?'" Arlyssa shared. "That really resonated with me, because I did get a lot of help, but once you reach your goals, how do you give back to others who need that same support?"

Looking back, Arlyssa reflects on what she was missing before WiCyS—camaraderie. Years of working on male-dominated teams often left her without the peer support she craved. Through WiCyS, she found not only technical development opportunities but also a renewed commitment to uplifting others. "It's great to point people in the right direction and help them however I can," she said.

When asked what advice she would offer to others considering a cybersecurity career, Arlyssa is quick to encourage: "If it crossed your mind, it's possible. It crossed your mind for a reason. It's not easy—it takes work—but if you're willing to study and put in the effort, you can absolutely do it." Sometimes, she adds, all it takes is one relatable person to make the journey feel possible.

For Arlyssa, WiCyS has been more than a professional organization—it has been a life-changing experience that reignited her passion, introduced her to like-minded women and inspired her to pay it forward. Through her leadership in the WiCyS DFW Affiliate and her dedication to supporting future security professionals, Arlyssa exemplifies the WiCyS mission: to recruit, retain and advance women in cybersecurity.



## Melissa Burns's Unscripted Journey into Cybersecurity



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"A defining moment in my career was attending the 2019 WiCyS conference, where I reconnected with a former classmate, **setting me on the path to a successful cybersecurity career** at Adobe. Saying yes to unexpected opportunities and trusting the power of connections transformed my path from creative storyteller to cybersecurity leader. **The WiCyS conference was the catalyst** that reminded me: growth begins when you believe in yourself and stay open to the possibilities around you."

**Melissa Burns**

*Principal Security Partner, Adobe*



Melissa Burns never followed a set script for her career, and that's exactly what makes her story so compelling. Starting out in the creative space and now thriving as a Principal Security Partner at Adobe, she has navigated bold career shifts, found new passions and built lasting connections. Today, she's proud to share her journey into cybersecurity and celebrate the important role that WiCyS (Women in CyberSecurity) played in her success.

Before stepping into cybersecurity, Melissa launched her career in the creative industry, earning a journalism degree from the University of Nevada – Las Vegas. She spent her early years working in media production and videography, where she developed a passion for Adobe products and the art of storytelling. However, over time, she found herself craving a career path that offered greater long-term growth and a deeper technical challenge.

Melissa's first steps into the tech world were modest yet meaningful: managing online book sales for her local library and teaching computer skills to seniors. These early experiences ignited a new sense of purpose and planted the first seeds of a future that would ultimately lead her beyond the creative space and into the world of technology.

Taking a bold leap, Melissa joined the U.S. Peace Corps, an experience she calls transformative. As an IT education volunteer in the island nation of Vanuatu, she was tasked with restoring a high school's computer lab, pushing her far beyond her comfort zone and into a space where her problem-solving skills flourished. Over three years, she became the go-to person for fixing computers and managing systems, expanding the lab from nine working machines to twenty-two. "Oftentimes, you would hear me saying, 'Yes, mi save blong fixim kompiuta blong yu,'" she recalled, which translates to "Yes, I can fix your computer." Her work soon extended into the wider community as she tackled malware issues and taught herself how to implement technical controls, laying the foundation for a deep passion for cybersecurity and setting her on a new career path in cyber defense.

When she returned to the U.S., Melissa was determined to break into the cybersecurity field. A simple Facebook post searching for an IT job led to a role as an IT Specialist at Taco Bell—an

## Melissa Burns's Unscripted Journey into Cybersecurity

unexpected but important stepping stone. Seeking deeper expertise, she enrolled in Carnegie Mellon University's prestigious Master of Information Systems Management program, with a specialization in Information Security.

During her studies, Melissa secured two key internships: one developing a cybersecurity training program for the South Australian government, and another with Carnegie Mellon's CERT division, where she contributed to federal IT and security projects. After graduating, she continued at CERT as a Cybersecurity Engineer, gaining critical experience in the industry.

Throughout her journey, networking consistently opened new doors, and WiCyS played a crucial role. Introduced to the organization through her connections at CERT, Melissa found mentorship, support and inspiration through WiCyS's mission of recruiting, retaining and advancing women in cybersecurity.

A pivotal moment in Melissa's journey came at the 2019 WiCyS conference, where she learned the power of saying yes to opportunities and trusting herself to build something meaningful from scratch. During the conference, she reconnected with a former Carnegie Mellon classmate working at Adobe, who later referred her for a job opening on their team. After a successful interview, Melissa moved from Pittsburgh to Seattle to join Adobe.

Her journey from creative to cybersecurity eventually brought her back to Adobe—not as a customer, but as a member of the company's security team. Having used Adobe products in her creative work, Melissa was now tasked with protecting them. Starting as an Information Security Analyst, she quickly advanced through roles such as Manager of Information Security, Senior Cloud Security Engineer (Risk Management) and Product and Software Security Manager (Strategic Remediation).

Now, as a Principal Security Partner and Cloud Lead for the Adobe products that fall under the Digital Media business unit, Melissa helps align the company's security initiatives with its business goals. She works closely with fellow Security Partners and product leaders to prioritize security while fostering cross-team collaboration. Her dynamic role blends technical expertise with strong communication skills.

Reflecting on her journey, Melissa has learned key lessons that have shaped her approach to challenges and opportunities. First, networking is essential. From landing her first IT job through a Facebook post to reconnecting with a classmate at WiCyS who introduced her to Adobe, she's seen how valuable strong connections can be. "Networking isn't just about meeting people—it's about sharing your goals and staying open to collaboration. You never know who might hold the key to your next opportunity," she says.

Many of Melissa's most rewarding experiences came from unexpected opportunities, like her leap into the Peace Corps and her transition into cybersecurity—both turning points in her career. She also highlights the importance of continuous learning. Whether through her master's

## Melissa Burns's Unscripted Journey into Cybersecurity

program or new challenges at Adobe, Melissa believes staying relevant in tech requires constant growth. "The willingness to keep learning has been critical to navigating each stage in my career," she shares.

Melissa Burns's journey into cybersecurity may not have been scripted, but it's one of growth, resilience and transformation. From her creative roots to her Peace Corps experience and later roles at Adobe, Melissa's story demonstrates that with perseverance, meaningful connections and a readiness to embrace the unexpected, anyone can carve out a successful career in cybersecurity.

To hear more about Melissa's story, watch her WiCyS BrightTalk Webinar ["From Creative User to Security Pro: My Unscripted Journey into Cybersecurity."](#)

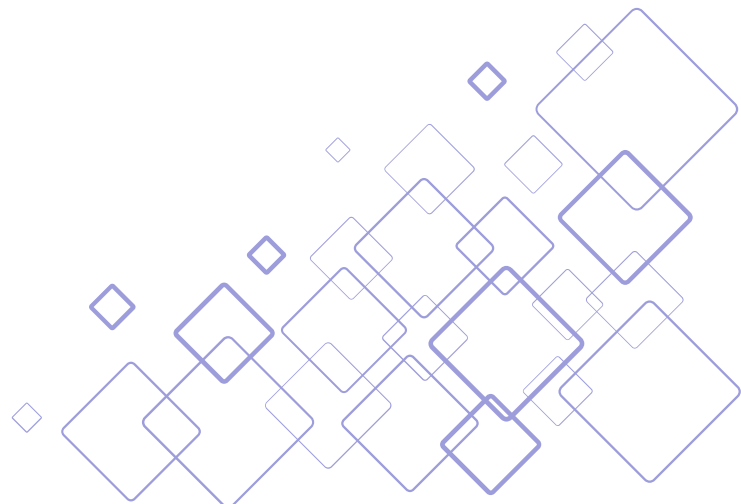




# WiCyS Stories

## NON-TRADITIONAL CAREER CHANGER

Cybersecurity is a field that celebrates unconventional entry points. This section explores those unique journeys and how WiCyS helped individuals navigate their transitions and feel welcomed in the cybersecurity space.



# How WiCyS Transformed **Alexis Watters's** Life: From Financial Instability to Independence



“The mentorship, resources and community support I received through WiCyS opened doors to the cybersecurity world and shattered long-held misconceptions about my capabilities. WiCyS **empowered me to believe in my worth**, leading me from financial instability to financial independence in under three years. The journey wasn't just about finding a career—it was about **rediscovering my confidence** and ability to provide for my family. WiCyS transformed my life, and I am committed to paying it forward by mentoring other women entering the field.”

### **Alexis Watters**

*Technical Lead / Senior BEC Forensic Investigator, Solis Security*



Alexis Watters discovered the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization at a pivotal moment in her life. Freshly divorced and a devoted mother of two, she faced financial strain and an uncertain future. Equipped with a degree in mass communication and a focus on electronic media, Alexis had previously navigated the frenetic world of broadcast journalism and TV film production, often burning the midnight oil on set. However, the arrival of her children prompted a shift to full-time motherhood. Following her divorce, she faced the daunting task of re-entering the workforce with somewhat outdated skills. Little did Alexis know that WiCyS would become the key to her transformative journey from financial instability to financial independence in less than three years.

In 2018, Alexis attended a Women in Tech interest meeting hosted by her local community college. Initially drawn towards web design because of her proficiency in graphic design and communication, she received unexpected advice—to delve into the world of cybersecurity. Despite feeling daunted by this unfamiliar territory, the meeting sparked a newfound curiosity within Alexis, challenging her to confront long-held misconceptions about her capabilities in the tech realm. Alexis's high school experience with programming classes in the late 90s had left her feeling out of place in the male-dominated field, instilling doubts about her capabilities in tech. However, the advisor's confidence at the interest meeting gave Alexis the push she needed to explore cybersecurity further, leading her to discover WiCyS through a Google search for "money for women in cybersecurity." Motivated by this encounter, Alexis resolved to pursue cybersecurity, marking January 2019 as the moment she decided to return to school.

Stumbling upon the WiCyS website marked the beginning of Alexis's support network within the cybersecurity field. The abundance of resources and nurturing environment fostered by WiCyS inspired her to actively participate in the community, attending webinars and expanding her LinkedIn network. Amidst her journey, one pivotal element was the mentorship Alexis received through WiCyS. Under the guidance of Ebudo Osime, a seasoned cyber threat intelligence professional, Alexis gained technical expertise and invaluable life skills. Ebudo taught Alexis to negotiate her worth, empowering her to advocate for salaries that reflected her value. This mentorship, bolstering Alexis's confidence and decision-making abilities, was critical in her swift career progression. Alexis attributes her mentor for imparting advice that she now shares

# How WiCyS Transformed **Alexis Watters's** Life: From Financial Instability to Independence

with junior members of her team, thereby perpetuating the cycle of support and empowerment within the cybersecurity community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Alexis faced formidable hurdles, struggling to stay afloat amidst trying circumstances. Dwelling below the area's median income, she found herself in a precarious position—earning just enough to disqualify her from government aid programs designed to assist her children with essentials like free lunches. This left her trapped in a frustrating limbo, earning too much for assistance yet struggling to make ends meet. Balancing her responsibilities was a constant challenge. Not only did she have to navigate her children's engagement with remote learning, but she also endeavored to pursue her own educational aspirations, attending virtual seminars, networking and tirelessly seeking internships and job prospects. The sheer weight of these demands nearly drove her to the brink of abandoning her studies altogether, but the unwavering support from her manager at the time emboldened her to persevere through the storm.

As a single mother, Alexis grappled with relentless financial hardships. In her time of need, the Last Mile Education Fund emerged as a lifeline, providing vital support precisely when she needed it most. When her windshield unexpectedly cracked, making her car unsafe to drive, the fund stepped in to cover the \$500 repair bill. This assistance went beyond merely addressing a practical concern; it served as a poignant reminder to Alexis that she wasn't alone in her journey. It provided a much-needed morale boost, reaffirming her belief that her endeavors were valued and supported, instilling the determination she needed to press forward with her studies.

The WiCyS Security Training Scholarship gave Alexis a gateway into the multifaceted world of cybersecurity, igniting her curiosity and expanding her horizons. Engaging in the CyberStart challenges, she discovered a passion for forensics. Observing a scarcity of participants delving into the intricate forensics challenges, where higher points were at stake, Alexis strategically focused on this domain. This decision paid off as she realized how much she enjoyed the detective work involved in forensics, prompting her to pursue this specialization further.

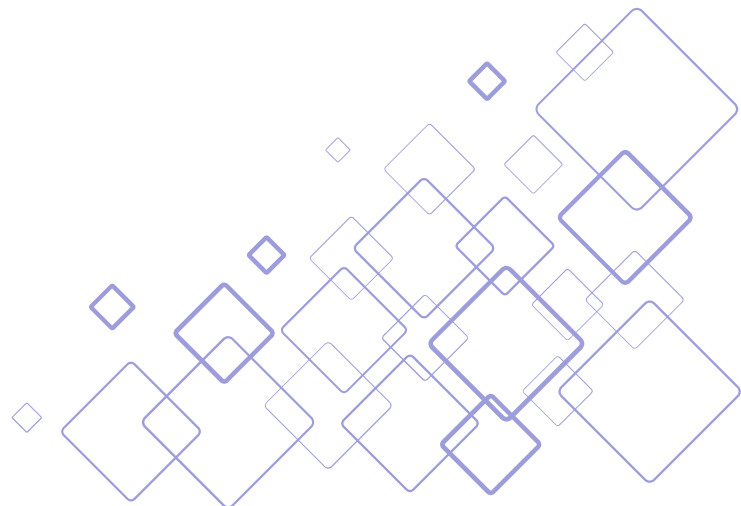
Networking through WiCyS opened a crucial internship opportunity for Alexis. Dave Alton, a CTO she connected with on LinkedIn after attending a webinar, offered her an internship at his company despite them having never taken on an intern before. In this role, Alexis was tasked with writing an incident response plan, allowing her to gain invaluable hands-on experience. After completing her internship and earning her associate's degree in cybersecurity, Alexis attended a webinar on incident response planning for MSPs and small businesses, where she met presenter Chris Loehr, the CTO of a tech company in Austin. This connection introduced Alexis to her current company and ultimately led to a full-time analyst position, where she quickly rose to become the technical lead of the email forensics team.

Through hard work, perseverance and the invaluable support of WiCyS, Alexis achieved a level of financial stability she once deemed unattainable, granting her a sense of security she had previously thought out of reach. Following this milestone in her career, Alexis seized the

# How WiCyS Transformed **Alexis Watters's** Life: From Financial Instability to Independence

opportunity to pay it forward, generously donating to the Last Mile Education Fund. Just as she experienced the profound impact of others caring about her success, Alexis now endeavors to extend that same support to individuals facing challenges similar to those she once confronted, affirming that someone believes in their potential as well.

Now, as a successful cybersecurity professional, Alexis is passionate about mentoring other women entering the field. She shares the lessons she learned about valuing oneself, negotiating salaries and navigating the cybersecurity landscape. Her journey from near poverty to prosperity is a testament to the power of perseverance and community support. WiCyS played a key role in transforming Alexis Watters' life, providing the resources, mentorship programs and nurturing community that gave her the confidence and support she needed to break into the cybersecurity field. Alexis's story exemplifies how women, with the right determination and opportunities, can achieve financial independence and a fulfilling career in cybersecurity. WiCyS is proud to have been part of Alexis's journey and looks forward to empowering many more women to realize their potential in this dynamic field.



## Christine Morency's Journey From Physical Therapy to Cloud Security



“WiCyS provided *the bridge I needed* to transition from physical therapy to the dynamic world of cybersecurity. Through the Security Training Scholarship Program and the supportive WiCyS community, I discovered an exciting new career path that not only ignited my intellect but also propelled my career and income to *unprecedented heights*. From the somewhat limited realm of physical therapy to the vast expanse of cloud security, WiCyS paved the way for me to find fulfillment and success beyond my wildest dreams.”

**Christine Morency**  
*Senior Cloud Security Specialist, Merck*



In the vast and dynamic realm of cybersecurity, tales of transformation and empowerment abound, and Christine Morency's story stands as a testament to the life-changing impact of the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization. From her humble beginnings in physical therapy to her current stature as a Senior Cloud Security Specialist at Merck, Christine's path to success in cybersecurity exemplifies the transformative power of passion, perseverance and community support.

Christine Morency, a 2013 Howard University graduate with a Doctorate in Physical Therapy, began her cybersecurity journey in 2020, spurred by a period of introspection as she sought fulfillment beyond her career in physical therapy. Despite her accomplishments in the field, Christine felt a persistent desire for greater intellectual challenge. It was during this period that she stumbled upon WiCyS and its Security Training Scholarship Program, a providential offering that furnished her with a structured pathway into the cybersecurity realm, despite her lack of prior experience in the domain. Drawn to WiCyS's commitment to inclusivity and accessibility, Christine wholeheartedly embraced the program in 2020, a decision that would reshape her professional trajectory profoundly.

WiCyS's emphasis on community and mentorship proved pivotal in Christine's professional evolution. From cohort leaders to career specialists, Christine found herself enveloped by a supportive network of individuals eager to guide her through each phase of her journey. The camaraderie and guidance she experienced alleviated the daunting feeling of navigating the cybersecurity landscape, empowering her to forge ahead with confidence and determination.

A key moment in Christine's narrative unfolded during her first WiCyS conference. Surrounded by the inspiring narratives of like-minded individuals, she felt emboldened to share her own journey. This transformative experience served as a catalyst, propelling Christine into new opportunities, ultimately resulting in her securing her first cybersecurity role as a Cloud Security Engineer at Booz Allen Hamilton. WiCyS not only expanded Christine's technical knowledge but also nurtured invaluable professional relationships crucial to her success. Remarkably, Christine found herself earning a higher income than she did at the peak of her career in

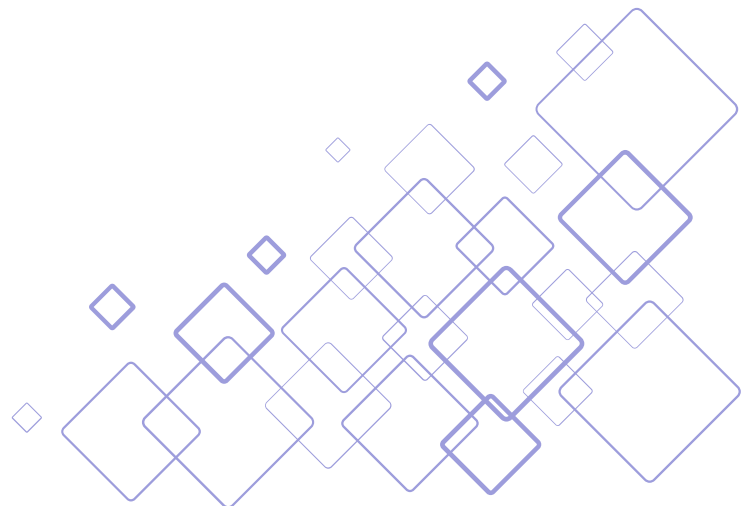
## Christine Morency's Journey From Physical Therapy to Cloud Security

physical therapy, an affirmation of the hard work she put in to contribute to the success of her newfound career path.

Central to Christine's journey was WiCyS's pioneering approach to cybersecurity education, epitomized by gamified challenges such as Capture the Flag (CTF) competitions. As someone who grew up immersed in gaming culture, Christine found herself drawn to the puzzles and challenges of cybersecurity. Her passion for the field grew as she recognized the potential for exploration and continuous learning beyond traditional education.

Today, Christine stands at the pinnacle of her cybersecurity career, having seamlessly transitioned from physical therapist to Senior Cloud Security Analyst. Reflecting on her journey, Christine acknowledges the profound impact of WiCyS on her life. From rendering accessible training opportunities and structured pathways for career transitions to fostering a supportive network, WiCyS played an indispensable role in shaping Christine's career trajectory and fueling her passion for cybersecurity.

As WiCyS continues its mission to empower women in cybersecurity, Christine's story serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration—a testament to the boundless possibilities that await women who dare to break down barriers in the cybersecurity realm.



# Breaking Barriers and Paying it Forward: Deborah Barnes's Cybersecurity Journey



“WiCyS has shown me that there are **women who uplift other women**. In a world where some see competition, WiCyS embodies collaboration and support. It's not just about breaking barriers; it's about **paving the way** for others, **amplifying voices** and creating a community where every woman thrives. Let them say no, but let us keep saying yes to each other's success.”

### Deborah Barnes

*Principal Information Security Engineer,  
Zebra Technologies*



In the dynamic landscape of cybersecurity, Deborah's story is a shining example of resilience, determination and the power of seizing opportunities. Deborah Barnes is a trailblazer in the cybersecurity field whose journey exemplifies the transformative potential of career changes and underscores the invaluable support network Women in Cybersecurity (WiCyS) offers to aspiring professionals.

Deborah's venture into cybersecurity was driven by a desire for intellectual growth and a willingness to embrace the unknown. Armed with two degrees in exercise science, her path took an unexpected turn following the birth of her first child, as she longed for a fresh challenge. Despite initial apprehensions about her lack of background in computer science, Deborah boldly ventured into the world of cybersecurity. Her determination to pursue a master's degree in the field marked the commencement of a fulfilling journey.

As Deborah recounts her journey, one can't help but marvel at her tenacity and resourcefulness. She recalls relentlessly reaching out to professors and recruiters, seeking internships and ultimately landing a full-time position at Forsythe Technologies—an achievement underscored by her willingness to "let them say no." This phrase, coined by her friend and mentor Mike Zachman from Zebra Technologies, encapsulates the pervasive gender gap in the job application process and reflects a stark reality. While men often apply for jobs when meeting just 60% of qualifications, women tend to hold back unless they meet 100%. However, Deborah's story challenges this narrative by demonstrating that courage, self-belief and a fearless "what do I have to lose?" attitude can open doors to unforeseen opportunities.

After completing her master's degree and accumulating two years of invaluable experience at Forsythe Technologies, Deborah sought fresh challenges and found herself drawn to a Threat and Vulnerability Management role at Grainger. Despite not meeting all the job requirements, she embraced the opportunity, asking herself once again, "what do I have to lose?" Her drive and persistence paid off as she secured the role at Grainger, where she flourished. Deborah quickly earned the respect of her manager and colleagues, with her manager even hailing her as one of the go-to security employees.

# Breaking Barriers and Paying it Forward: **Deborah Barnes's** Cybersecurity Journey

After several years of success at Grainger, Deborah caught the attention of others. She was presented an opportunity by a leader who not only "chose her" but was committed to seeing her further achieve and shine. Therefore, she accepted a position at Cradlepoint in the business enterprise wireless division as a Senior attack surface management analyst and was eventually promoted to Principal vulnerability engineer. Beyond her own success, she actively advocated for the inclusion of women in the field, persuading her manager, Ken Quigley, to recruit another WiCyS member. At present, Deborah has started a new role at Zebra Technologies as a Principal information security engineer on the TVM team.

WiCyS emerged as a pivotal force in Deborah's career trajectory, offering a supportive community where women champion each other, lift each other up and empower each other to succeed. Recollecting her time at the 2023 WiCyS conference, Deborah fondly remembers a chance meeting with a fellow attendee sporting a WiCyS t-shirt at the airport—a serendipitous encounter that ultimately resulted in the recruitment of a WiCyS student as a full-time employee in her company. This anecdote encapsulates the essence of WiCyS: fostering mentorship, collaboration and inclusivity within the cybersecurity landscape.

For Deborah, WiCyS epitomizes the spirit of uplifting others—a refreshing departure from environments where women often feel marginalized or threatened. Buoyed by her positive experiences with WiCyS, Deborah is committed to paying it forward, advocating for women's voices to be heard and amplifying their contributions in male-dominated spaces.

In her role at Cradlepoint, Deborah's journey came even more full circle as she leveraged her platform to uplift her women colleagues, encouraging them to showcase their work and embrace visibility. By challenging traditional notions of qualifications and advocating for a culture of support and mentorship, Deborah embodies the life-cycle of WiCyS, paving the way for future generations of women in cybersecurity.

Deborah's narrative serves as a beacon of inspiration for aspiring cybersecurity professionals, particularly women transitioning from a different career path. Her story underscores the transformative power of seizing opportunities, embracing uncertainty and fostering inclusive communities where women uplift each other. As we celebrate Deborah Barnes' cyber journey, let us also recognize the vital role of community support in fostering diversity, equity and inclusion within the cybersecurity landscape. Together, we can follow Deborah's lead, empowering women to shatter glass ceilings, defy expectations and leave an indelible mark on the ever-evolving landscape of cybersecurity.

# How WiCyS Changed Everything: **Devonie Nelson's** Journey to Cyber Success



“WiCyS was a **game-changer** in my journey, offering unwavering support and invaluable resources that **reshaped my entire life**. Through attending conferences and founding a student chapter, my involvement with WiCyS directly led to **securing my dream job** at Modern Health. The organization's dedication to empowering women in cybersecurity not only bolstered my confidence but also provided the vital connections I needed to thrive in this field.”

### **Devonie Nelson**

*Junior Cybersecurity Engineer,  
Modern Health*



Devonie Nelson's entry into cybersecurity came during a particularly challenging time in her life. She had just separated from her husband, moved back in with her mother and was adjusting to life as a single parent with a three-month-old daughter. Financially strained, she relied on government assistance, navigating the difficult process of proving her need for help.

At that time, Devonie was on maternity leave from a company undergoing a series of layoffs. Just before she was due to return to work, she received the devastating news that she had been laid off. With a young child to support and bills piling up, Devonie faced a tough decision. Encouraged by a friend to explore cybersecurity, she decided to dive in headfirst, determined to overcome any obstacles in her way.

In August 2022, she enrolled in a master's program at the University of Houston - Downtown, focusing on security management with a cybersecurity concentration. The Last Mile Education Fund provided crucial support, helping her navigate the financial challenges of her studies. As she searched for additional resources to bolster her success, Devonie discovered WiCyS (Women in CyberSecurity), which became an invaluable part of her journey.

Devonie first encountered WiCyS on LinkedIn. Intrigued by the organization's partnerships and opportunities, she joined as a student member. Having previously encountered few organizations that truly “talked the talk and walked the walk,” WiCyS stood out for its commitment to recruiting, retaining and advancing women in cybersecurity. For Devonie, the resources and support provided by WiCyS were invaluable in her career journey.

As a WiCyS member, Devonie participated in the 2022 ISC2 Winter Boot Camp, seeking to build her credibility in cybersecurity. Through intensive training and mentorship, she achieved her first cybersecurity certification, finishing in the top three of her cohort. This accomplishment boosted her confidence and marked the beginning of her professional journey in cybersecurity.

In March 2022, Devonie attended her first WiCyS conference on a student scholarship. There, she connected with inspiring women in the cybersecurity community who encouraged her to

# How WiCyS Changed Everything: **Devonie Nelson's** Journey to Cyber Success

persevere despite her initial doubts about securing a job in the field. Devonie's involvement with WiCyS extended to establishing a student chapter at the University of Houston - Downtown. This initiative led to a summer sales internship with Axis Communications, where she networked with professionals in the cybersecurity industry and gained valuable exposure.

During her internship, Devonie was approached by ComTec Information Systems for a network security analyst position. Initially hesitant due to her lack of experience with firewall configuration, she was drawn to the opportunity for training and growth. Devonie's proactive approach and eagerness to learn impressed the hiring manager, leading to her securing the role. The learning curve was steep, but the experience was instrumental in advancing her career.

Two months into her position at ComTec, Devonie was contacted on LinkedIn by a manager at Modern Health, a mental health startup company. She was offered a junior cybersecurity engineer role, which felt like a dream come true. Upon starting this new role in September 2023, Devonie's manager provided her with the time and support she needed to learn and specialize in her areas of interest within cybersecurity.

As she later learned, Devonie's involvement with WiCyS played a significant role in her hiring at Modern Health. The manager, initially considering another strong candidate, was advised to look into WiCyS members. Discovering Devonie's dedication to WiCyS and her leadership as a chapter president, he decided to bring her on board.

Nearly a year into her role, Devonie is thriving as a junior cybersecurity engineer at Modern Health. She has regular meetings with her manager to discuss career progression and opportunities for advancement. Feeling highly valued, Devonie sees a clear path to growth and development, reflecting on how far she has come since her challenging start. Having achieved financial stability, she is no longer reliant on government assistance and can now comfortably provide for herself and her daughter.

Devonie is deeply passionate about sharing her journey to inspire other women embarking on careers in cybersecurity. While she acknowledges that not everyone may encounter the same "pinch me" moments, she hopes her story showcases the vast possibilities within the field. Devonie remains dedicated to paying it forward, speaking at conferences and motivating others to pursue their dreams in cybersecurity.

# Andrea Molnar's Path from Communications to Cybersecurity



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“WiCyS helped me build a strong foundation in cybersecurity through globally recognized scholarships and certifications. Programs like the Google Cybersecurity Certificate and the Target Cyber Defense Challenge **expanded my network and provided invaluable hands-on experience.**

Coming from Eastern Europe, where cybersecurity is still emerging and biases about women in the field persist, WiCyS **empowered me to realize my full potential** and provided an entry point into the global dialogue of outstanding female cybersecurity professionals.”

### Andrea Molnar

*Information Security Specialist,  
Erste Bank Hungary*



Andrea Molnar's journey to cybersecurity is a powerful example of how the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) community empowers and connects individuals from all backgrounds. A member of the WiCyS organization for less than a year, Andrea has already made a remarkable career shift from her roots in communications to a promising future in cybersecurity. Her story highlights how WiCyS unites a global community, helping individuals redefine their career paths and realize their full potential.

Originally from Romania and currently based in Hungary, Andrea's path to cybersecurity was anything but conventional. With a background in communications and public relations, she found herself questioning her career direction. After taking a personality test that pointed her toward IT, Andrea began exploring new possibilities. Though initially hesitant about making a career change, she ultimately chose to pursue cybersecurity—a decision that would transform her life.

WiCyS played a crucial role in Andrea's journey. “A friend recommended WiCyS to me about two and a half years ago, but I wasn't ready to join,” she shared. “Eventually, I realized that cybersecurity was the field I wanted to pursue, and joining WiCyS was one of the best decisions I've ever made.” Andrea quickly immersed herself in WiCyS programs, including the Google Cybersecurity Certificate Program and the Target Cyber Defense Challenge. These opportunities provided her with hands-on experience, technical skills and a supportive, global network of women in her new field.

The Target Cyber Defense Challenge was Andrea's first exposure to a Capture the Flag (CTF) competition. She described it as both challenging and exhilarating, pushing her to think creatively and develop skills in both defensive and offensive cybersecurity. “The WiCyS Slack community was incredible. People offered hints and guidance without giving away the answers, which allowed me to learn and grow,” she explained. “It was my first time attacking and defending in such a structured way. The combination of problem-solving and teamwork was mind-blowing.” The Google Cybersecurity Certificate Program further enriched Andrea's

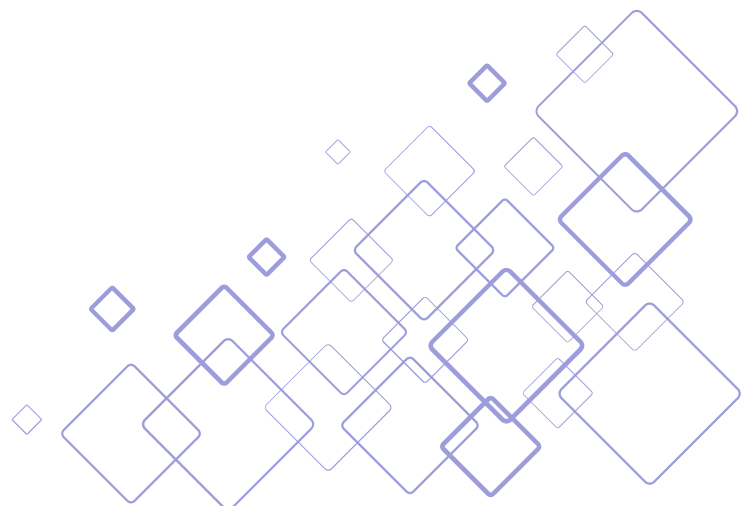
# Andrea Molnar's Path from Communications to Cybersecurity

expertise. Through this program, she gained confidence in her technical abilities, honing her skills in areas such as incident response, SQL and scripting.

Cybersecurity is still an emerging field in Eastern Europe, where societal stigmas and biases often challenge women aspiring to pursue technical roles. For Andrea, WiCyS provided more than just education and opportunities; it offered a vital network of women breaking down barriers worldwide. "WiCyS helped me realize my full potential and provided an entry point into the global dialogue of outstanding female cybersecurity professionals," she said. "This has significantly contributed to my career success so far."

Today, Andrea works as an Information Security Specialist at CEE Banking Group and continues to build her expertise in cybersecurity. Thanks to WiCyS, she has not only advanced her technical skills but also discovered a community that champions her aspirations. Reflecting on her journey, Andrea expressed her gratitude: "Joining WiCyS was life-changing. It gave me the tools, support and confidence to succeed in a field that once felt out of reach."

Andrea's story is a testament to the transformative impact WiCyS has on its members. Through globally recognized scholarships, accessible programs and a strong international community, WiCyS is paving the way for women in cybersecurity. For aspiring professionals like Andrea, WiCyS is more than just an organization—it's a launchpad for dreams, a resource for growth and a community that celebrates diversity and inclusion in cybersecurity.



# Thanyathorn (Smile) Thanapattheerakul's Journey from Software Engineering to Cybersecurity



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“The WiCyS Target Cyber Defense Challenge was an incredible opportunity that allowed me to develop new skills while participating in real-world offensive and defensive security scenarios. I embraced the challenge, stepping out of my comfort zone to acquire knowledge within a limited timeline. This experience **sharpened my problem-solving skills and enhanced my documentation capabilities** as a cybersecurity researcher. The intensity of the challenge allowed me to showcase my resourcefulness and ability to thrive under pressure. It **reinforced to me the power of collaboration and support** available within the WiCyS community.”

**Thanyathorn (Smile) Thanapattheerakul**

*Vulnerability Research Analysis Lead,  
Trend Micro Canada Technologies Inc.*



For many tech professionals, career transitions can feel daunting. Thanyathorn (Smile) Thanapattheerakul, a former front-end software engineer, found herself at a crossroads in 2021. She loved working in technology but didn't see herself in the same role long-term. Eager to explore new career paths, she stumbled upon cybersecurity—a field that intrigued her but felt unfamiliar. Little did she know, this discovery would set her on a transformative journey, one that would be shaped by a supportive community and bold leaps of faith.

Smile's first step into cybersecurity was through Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS). She joined the Toronto affiliate's Slack community and attended social gatherings, where she connected with women who had successfully navigated similar career transitions. Seeing others thrive in cybersecurity reassured her that this new path was not only possible but promising.

“The main part of WiCyS that helped me during my career transition was the community,” Smile shared. “The meet-ups in Toronto built a safe environment for me to go in and see all the folks in cybersecurity, especially other women who were going through the same challenges and journeys. It gave me the space to navigate my cybersecurity journey.”

For nearly three years, Smile's involvement with WiCyS remained local. However, a single LinkedIn post changed everything. In 2024, she came across an announcement about the WiCyS Target Cyber Defense Challenge, a Capture the Flag (CTF) competition designed to give participants hands-on cybersecurity experience. The grand prize? A scholarship to attend the WiCyS Conference. Despite feeling uncertain about her chances, Smile decided to take the leap.

“I figured, if I won, I could attend the conference, but even if I didn't, I would still gain valuable experience.” It was a calculated risk, one that would ultimately push her out of her comfort zone. Smile ended up winning the conference scholarship, finishing in fourth place. The competition proved to be a pivotal moment in her journey. It challenged her in ways she hadn't expected, strengthening her problem-solving and technical skills while showing her how much pressure she could truly handle.

# Thanyathorn (Smile) Thanapattheerakul's Journey from Software Engineering to Cybersecurity

"The WiCyS Target Cyber Defense Challenge was an incredible opportunity that allowed me to learn new skills and experience real-world offensive and defensive security scenarios. I embraced the challenge, stepping out of my comfort zone to acquire knowledge within a limited timeline. This experience sharpened my thought process and enhanced my documentation skills as a cybersecurity researcher."

Following the challenge, Smile's engagement with WiCyS deepened. She joined the global WiCyS Mentorship Program—not just as a mentee, but as a mentor. "I like to coach and mentor people, and that's also a big part of my job right now," she explained. As a Team Lead at Trend Micro Canada Technologies Inc., Smile helps run an internship program in the company's vulnerability research department. She trains aspiring vulnerability researchers, guiding them as they develop their skills and gain confidence in the field.

For anyone considering a transition into cybersecurity, Smile emphasizes the wealth of resources WiCyS offers. "If you're going through a career transition, the WiCyS Security Training Scholarship Program is an eminent opportunity for beginners or those looking to build credibility in cybersecurity," she advised. "Even just attending WiCyS webinars throughout the year provides insights from professionals in the field."

Looking back, Smile realizes her journey wasn't just about switching careers; it was about finding a community that gave her the courage to take risks. She didn't have every step mapped out when she first joined WiCyS, but through each challenge and new connection, she discovered her own potential. Now, as she prepares to attend the upcoming WiCyS Conference, she is eager to continue growing, connecting and giving back—just as others once did for her.

Smile's story is a testament to the power of community, mentorship and taking chances. For anyone considering a career in cybersecurity, her journey is proof that sometimes, the biggest transformations begin with a single step into the unknown.



## Mariana Ruiz de Streuhofer's Leap Into Cybersecurity



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“My journey with WiCyS has truly been life-changing, both as a mentee and a mentor. The mentorship I’ve received has **significantly shaped my professional growth**, while mentoring others has given me the chance to give back and strengthen this incredible community. Being a part of WiCyS has deepened my passion for cybersecurity, empowered me to step into leadership and **given me a real sense of belonging.**”

**Mariana Ruiz de Streuhofer**

*Principal Consultant, Devoteam*



Mariana Ruiz de Streuhofer’s journey into cybersecurity wasn’t linear; it was a bold career pivot driven by her passion for lifelong learning and sustained through the support of a strong community. With over two decades in IT, a background in Computer Science Engineering and an MBA, Mariana was a seasoned professional. Yet despite her extensive qualifications, stepping into the cybersecurity world felt unfamiliar and at times, isolating.

Even with her extensive technical background, Mariana was entering a space that was still new to her. She had the skills, the education and the drive, but she didn’t yet have the roadmap. What she did have, thanks to a classmate at her university, was an introduction to the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization, which made all the difference.

“When I started exploring cybersecurity, I didn’t know exactly where to go or how to find my place,” Mariana recalls. “But I didn’t have to figure it out alone.”

Through WiCyS, Mariana found more than just a network. She found a support system. The mentorship program provided her with guidance on certification prep, career negotiations and how to overcome the niche challenges of breaking into cybersecurity. The resources were practical, but just as importantly, the community offered her something she didn’t know she needed: belonging.

As an international student with roots in Germany and Mexico, and having lived in Sweden, Austria, France and the U.S., Mariana knew what it was like to start over in a new place. “Even when you speak the language, it’s a different world,” she says. “You miss home. You sort of feel like you don’t belong. But with WiCyS, I felt welcomed. I got that sense of belonging that’s so important when you’re starting over.”

WiCyS helped Mariana bridge the gap between experience and opportunity. It gave her the confidence to claim space in a field where she once felt like an outsider. And it empowered her to keep building even as she was still learning.

## Mariana Ruiz de Streuhofer's Leap Into Cybersecurity

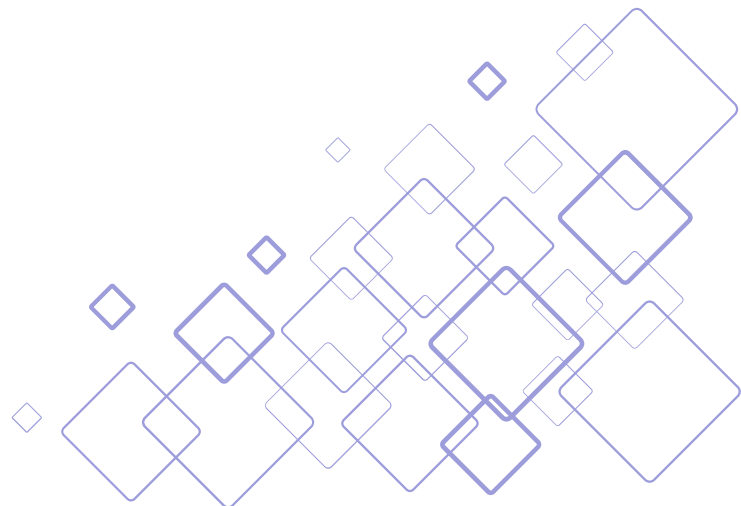
Today, Mariana isn't just a mentee; she's a mentor. She gives back through WiCyS, Johnson & Johnson WiSTEM2D and Blacks in Cyber (BIC), helping others navigate the same uncertainty she once felt. Her leadership extends even further as she currently serves as a USG Student Ambassador and Treasurer for the USG Student Council at UMBC, and she previously served as Secretary for the IEEE Women in Engineering Forum USA East 2025 Organizing Committee.

Her contributions to the cybersecurity field have not gone unnoticed. Mariana was shortlisted for the Most Inspiring Women in Cyber Awards, highlighted during IEEE's Mentorship Month and awarded a scholarship to attend the 2025 WiCyS Conference in Dallas. She was also selected as a local lead for the NASA Space Apps Challenge and received the AWS Cloud Institute Full Learner Grant Award from Amazon Web Services.

Despite her decades of experience in IT, Mariana is the first to acknowledge that cybersecurity is still a relatively new chapter in her career. "I have over 20 years of experience in IT, but only three in cybersecurity," she shares. But that didn't stop her; it motivated her. With the support of WiCyS, she found the confidence, knowledge and sense of community she needed to keep moving forward. "Being part of this great community has made me feel like I can succeed, be myself and continuously grow."

In December 2024, Mariana graduated with her Master's of Professional Studies in Cybersecurity from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. And now, she's paying it forward. She regularly encourages other women to join the community that helped shape her journey. "Whenever I meet women interested in cybersecurity, I tell them, 'I belong to this amazing community. Please become a member right now.'" She especially urges new members to take full advantage of the mentorship program, which played a key role in her success.

Mariana continues to build on the solid foundation WiCyS helped her establish, using her experience to lift others as she climbs. Her story is a powerful reminder that no matter how seasoned you are in one field, starting something new doesn't have to be lonely. With WiCyS, Mariana found the tools, the community and the confidence she needed to thrive, and now she's making sure others can succeed too.



# Alex Perotti's Bold Leap from Nonprofit to Cybersecurity Trailblazer



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“The Target Cyber Defense Challenge was *my gateway into cybersecurity*. It pushed me beyond my comfort zone and helped me uncover a passion I hadn't fully realized. The challenges kept me engaged and *showed me what I was capable of, even without a traditional technical background*. Through the experience, I found a supportive community of incredible women and mentors who believed in me. WiCyS gave me the confidence, resources and connections I needed to take those critical first steps and continue growing in my cybersecurity career.”

**Alex Perotti**

*Principal Threat Intelligence Analyst*



Before Alex Perotti ever reverse-engineered a piece of malware or became a Principal Threat Intelligence Analyst on a global cyber team, she was working behind the scenes in the nonprofit sector. For nearly a decade, she managed everything from communications and social media to graphic design and digital strategy. With a creative and tech-savvy background, she was comfortable with digital tools, but hadn't yet imagined herself thriving in the world of cybersecurity.

“I was always a bit of a tech-nerdy child,” she said, reflecting on a curiosity that lingered well beyond childhood. That same curiosity led her to explore cybersecurity in early 2021. She began taking online classes, reading tech-related books and searching for training opportunities. That's when she discovered the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization.

The first program that caught her attention was the WiCyS Security Training Scholarship, but applications had just closed. Still, she reached out and was connected with a mentor through WiCyS, who encouraged her to become a member, engage with the community and keep an eye out for future opportunities. “She told me WiCyS was a safe space for me to explore the field, connect with others and figure out if cybersecurity was the right path for me,” Alex said. That encouragement led her to attend webinars, join open initiatives and begin building community while still working full-time in the nonprofit world.

In early 2022, the WiCyS Target Cyber Defense Challenge opened for applications. Though Alex had no prior cybersecurity experience, she applied, and it became a defining moment in her career. “I had never even opened up a binary disassembler. I barely knew what that was at the time,” she recalled. “I was coming from a background in digital communications—creative, humanities-focused work. But I decided to try it anyway and see what I could learn.”

What began as an intimidating step quickly became a transformative experience. The program presented a variety of challenges that kept her fully engaged and captivated from start to finish. Alex advanced through all three tiers of the challenge and placed among the Top 10 participants. “I discovered what my real passion was, thanks to the Target Cyber

# Alex Perotti's Bold Leap from Nonprofit to Cybersecurity Trailblazer

Defense Challenge," she said. "That's when I realized—this might be it. This might be the field for me."

In the final tier of the program, she had the opportunity to present to the Target cyber team and set clear goals for herself: earn the GIAC Reverse Engineering Malware Certification and pursue a career in reverse engineering. With her characteristic grit, aptitude and determination, she has since achieved every goal she outlined. "The challenge gave me the boost, the community and the confidence that I belonged in this space," Alex said.

Just months after starting the challenge, Alex felt ready to apply for cybersecurity jobs. She landed her first intelligence role in July 2022 as an OSINT Specialist at QOMPLEX, Inc., a cybersecurity vendor. At the same time, she enrolled in the SANS Cyber Women's Academy, completing the program and earning the GIAC Reverse Engineering Malware Certification—just as she had planned.

Today, Alex works in cyber threat intelligence as a Principal Threat Intelligence Analyst for a top global firm, where she reverse-engineers malware linked to both cybercrime and Advanced Persistent Threats (APTs). Her career shift has not only been professionally defining but personally life-changing. As a single mom to a toddler, cybersecurity has given her financial stability and peace of mind. "I'm definitely more financially stable and secure now. Reverse engineering is a niche skillset that's in high demand, and that gives me a strong foundation even in a volatile job market. Having that stability at my core is absolutely essential—it's what allows me to move forward with confidence."

At every step, the WiCyS community has been a cornerstone in Alex's journey. She cherishes her experience at the WiCyS annual conference. "I still get goosebumps thinking about the keynote stories and the amazing women I met there." From her first mentor to the friendships formed during the Target Cyber Defense Challenge, she's found people who not only believed in her but walked alongside her. She highlights her relationship with Noureen Njoroge, WiCyS board member and seasoned threat intelligence analyst, as a pivotal part of her career journey. "Noureen has empowered me and mentored me throughout my transition. I look up to her and the incredible things she's done in cyber. When I think about where I want to be 10 years from now, I see someone like her."

When asked what her past self would think of where she is today, Alex smiled. "She would think I made the best choice I could make." Her advice to others exploring cybersecurity without a traditional background? "Just follow your gut. People will have doubts. You might have doubts. But eventually, you'll meet people who see your value and want to support you."

With courage, community and curiosity, Alex rewrote her future and continues to thrive. Her journey from nonprofit communications to cybersecurity has fueled a deep commitment to growth through education, certifications and new experiences. Thanks to her involvement with WiCyS and the Target Cyber Defense Challenge, she now pursues her career with confidence and clarity, knowing exactly where her future lies.

# Gloria Zayas's Career Change and the Power of Community



“Although I have 26 years of experience in IT, I am relatively new to cybersecurity. Through my involvement with WiCyS, including the mentorship program, the AI Learning Series, and the Target Cyber Defense Challenge, I’ve **successfully transitioned into this next phase of my career while building confidence and meaningful connections**. Attending my first WiCyS Conference in 2023 was a joyful and affirming experience. Meeting so many women and hearing stories that reflected my own career journey **reminded me that I was not alone** after years of often being the only woman in the room.”

### Gloria Zayas

Security Educator, Howard  
Community College



Gloria Zayas has spent more than 26 years working in technology, but her journey into cybersecurity represents a meaningful pivot, one that required learning, humility and a strong support system. After building a long career in telecom and IT, Gloria transitioned into cybersecurity just over five years ago.

Today, she is an adjunct security educator at Howard Community College in Columbia, Maryland, where she has taught for the past three years. She also works with Google Cloud Consulting as a Senior Technical Account Manager. While Gloria brought decades of technical experience with her, stepping into cybersecurity meant starting over in many ways—learning new concepts, navigating unfamiliar roles and figuring out where she fit within a fast-evolving field.

As a career changer, Gloria intentionally sought out opportunities to learn from others and connect with professionals who understood the realities of cybersecurity work. She completed courses, explored professional organizations and ultimately discovered WiCyS after landing roles as a Cybersecurity Success Manager at Tenable and later as a Technical Support Account Manager at Splunk.

From the beginning, WiCyS helped answer questions that went beyond career advancement. It gave Gloria a space to talk openly about the challenges of doing the work itself across different roles, industries and stages of experience. The WiCyS community helped her quiet the doubts that often come with entering a new field later in one's career.

That sense of belonging became especially clear when Gloria attended her first WiCyS Conference in Denver. Walking into a room filled with women, many of whom shared stories that mirrored her own career journey, was both emotional and affirming.

For much of her 26-year career, Gloria had often been the only woman in the room, navigating technical spaces without a built-in community. At WiCyS, she experienced something different: a space where women could openly celebrate their successes, learn from one another and see

# Gloria Zayas's Career Change and the Power of Community

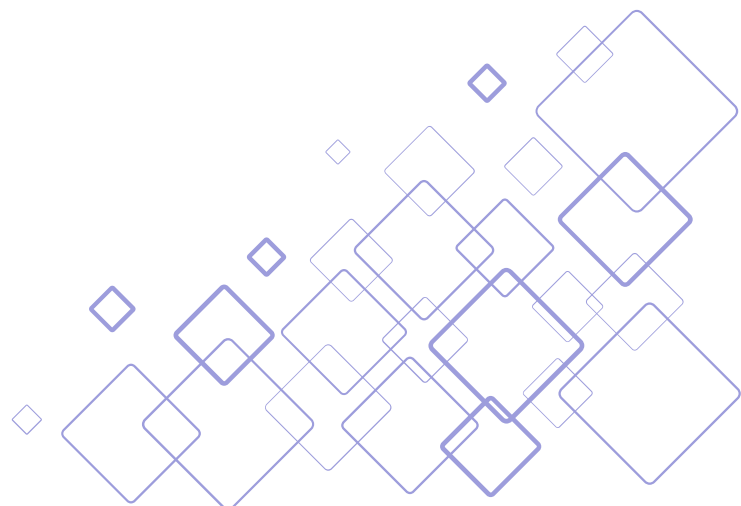
themselves reflected in the stories on stage. The conference became a turning point, solidifying her connection to WiCyS and inspiring her to become more involved.

Following that first conference, Gloria joined the WiCyS Mentorship Program and helped establish a WiCyS Student Chapter at Howard Community College. Mentorship quickly became one of the most meaningful parts of her WiCyS experience.

She has participated in the program as both a mentee and a mentor, finding equal value in each role. As a mentee, Gloria benefited from conversations with experienced women in cybersecurity who helped her think through next steps and long-term goals. As a mentor, she has guided multiple cohorts, sharing perspective, encouragement and lessons learned from decades as a woman in tech. She often reflects that if she had a community like WiCyS to lean on earlier in her career, the journey might have felt far less lonely.

WiCyS has also supported Gloria's continued learning as cybersecurity and technology continue to evolve. She participated in the WiCyS AI Learning Series in 2025, drawn to the growing intersection of AI and cybersecurity and the opportunities it presents for professionals in the field. She has also taken part in the WiCyS Target Cyber Defense Challenge, her first Capture the Flag competition, which tested her skills and reinforced her commitment to lifelong learning.

Looking back, Gloria describes the greatest impact of WiCyS in one word: community. Seeing rooms full of women learning, competing, mentoring, and supporting one another left a lasting impression and continues to shape how she shows up as an educator, mentor and cybersecurity professional. For Gloria, WiCyS has been more than a professional organization; it has been a catalyst in her career change, a source of confidence during uncertainty and a reminder that she does not have to navigate cybersecurity alone. She describes her WiCyS experience as an investment in herself, meaning putting herself out there, allowing others to learn from her and showing those coming after her that they can do this too.



# Gözde Karaca's Journey of Reinvention, Reskilling and Redefining Her Future



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“After finishing my Master’s in Industrial Engineering and building a strong foundation through my work with leading companies such as Siemens, Porsche and Mercedes, I began to explore how I could further align my career with my long-term interests. This led me to follow my dream of moving to California to pursue a cybersecurity program at Saddleback College. **Thanks to the support of the WiCyS community, I found my place in the field and decided to stay.** Through programs such as the Target Cyber Defense Challenge and the Security Training Scholarship, my interest and confidence grew, and **I realized I truly belong in cybersecurity.** I am excited to keep learning and growing in this field.”

### Gözde Karaca

*OT Cyber Security  
Risk Manager, ALTANA*



For Gözde Karaca, cybersecurity was not always part of the plan. Born in Germany and holding a Master’s degree in Industrial Engineering, she built an impressive early career working with global companies such as Siemens, Porsche and Mercedes. Her roles spanned procurement, sales, logistics, and project management, giving her a strong foundation in complex, analytical environments. Yet despite her success, something felt missing. That realization became the catalyst for a bold career shift.

While working on an IT-focused project at Mercedes, Gözde found herself increasingly drawn to the technical side of her work. At the same time, she held a lifelong dream of moving to California. That dream led her to Saddleback College in Mission Viejo, where she enrolled in the Cyber Security & Information Security Analyst program. What began as a way to expand her engineering skill set quickly evolved into a passion that reshaped her career goals.

As an international student entering the cybersecurity field, Gözde sought community and support. A simple Google search led her to Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS), a discovery that would change the trajectory of her career. Having often been the only woman in the room throughout her engineering career, she was eager to connect with other women and hear their stories. Joining WiCyS marked the first time she had been part of a cybersecurity or tech-focused community—an experience that solidified her decision to pursue a future in the field.

She describes WiCyS as a place where voices are valued, and gender never defines worth. “I’ve never experienced a more supportive environment,” Gözde shares. “Women help each other without expecting anything in return. WiCyS is highly supportive, career-changing, women-elevating, and incredibly confidence-boosting.”

Through WiCyS, Gözde immersed herself in hands-on learning opportunities that strengthened both her technical skills and her confidence. She participated in the WiCyS Target Cyber Defense Challenge, her first-ever Capture the Flag (CTF) competition, where the gamified learning experience pushed her out of her comfort zone and accelerated her growth. She later joined the WiCyS Incident Response & Review Mini-Sprint, gaining real-world experience analyzing logs, identifying threats and working through the full incident response lifecycle.

# Gözde Karaca's Journey of Reinvention, Reskilling and Redefining Her Future

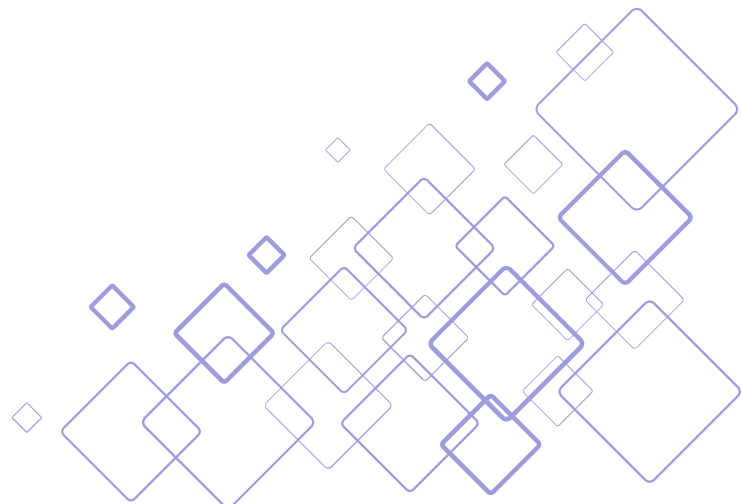
Gözde also took part in the WiCyS Security Training Scholarship, advancing to Tier 3 and connecting with accomplished peers across the cybersecurity community. A standout component for her was the talent assessment, which helped her better understand her strengths across defensive, offensive and compliance domains. She also completed the WiCyS Spring Camp, earning the ISC2 CC – Certified in Cybersecurity certification, an important credential that validated her knowledge and supported her job search.

In December 2024, Gözde completed her cybersecurity program at Saddleback College. Just months later, she landed her first cybersecurity role as an Information Security Analyst in Governance, Risk and Compliance (GRC) at Klever Compliance in Los Angeles. She credits WiCyS with playing a major role in her success, from hands-on skill development to the confidence gained through community support.

Today, Gözde's journey has come full circle. She has recently relocated back to Germany for a new role as an OT Cyber Security Risk Manager at ALTANA, where she focuses on protecting manufacturing environments by managing cyber risk at the intersection of operational technology and IT. The role allows her to draw directly on both her industrial engineering background and her cybersecurity expertise.

Despite the move, Gözde remains closely connected to WiCyS. She continues as a mentee in the WiCyS Mentorship Program and plans to get involved with the WiCyS Germany Affiliate. Looking ahead, she hopes to grow into a leadership role and give back as a mentor and senior leader. "All the training, programming and time I spent with WiCyS led me to where I am now," she reflects. "Cybersecurity felt scary at first, but seeing so many women who transitioned careers just like me changed everything."

WiCyS played a pivotal role in Gözde's journey of reinvention, helping her reskill with confidence, recognize her strengths and redefine what her future could look like in cybersecurity. Through community, mentorship and hands-on learning, she found not only technical growth but a deep sense of belonging in a field that once felt intimidating. As she continues to grow, Gözde carries the WiCyS mission with her, committed to supporting and elevating the next generation of women in cybersecurity.





# WiCyS Stories

## STUDENT & FACULTY

The future of cybersecurity starts in the classroom, where students and educators are shaping the next generation of professionals. This section showcases student success, innovative faculty and WiCyS' support through scholarships, mentorship and skills based training.



## Smriti Bhatt's Cybersecurity Journey: Harnessing the Power of Mentorship



“In my journey, WiCyS has been more than an organization—it's been my anchor and my launchpad. It's shown me that in cybersecurity, **representation matters deeply**. When I first attended a WiCyS conference in 2018, I saw women who looked like me, excelling and leading in this field. That **visibility** gave me the confidence to step boldly into my career. WiCyS not only transformed my path but empowered me to transform others'. It's a community where we don't just break barriers; **we build bridges** for the next generation of women in cybersecurity.”

### Smriti Bhatt

*Assistant Professor of Cybersecurity,  
Purdue University*



In the spring of 2018, Smriti Bhatt stood at a pivotal moment in her career journey. She was in the final stages of her PhD, grappling with the pressures of completing her thesis and navigating the daunting job market. Smriti was determined to enter the professional world with confidence and resilience. Seeking avenues to bolster her readiness for the future, she serendipitously encountered the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization.

In March 2018, Smriti received a student scholarship to attend her first WiCyS conference in Chicago. There, she witnessed a powerful vision: women excelling in cybersecurity at every career stage. Seeing women of color like herself making significant contributions in the field instilled in Smriti a sense of representation and empowerment, fueling her aspirations to make a similar impact.

After earning her PhD in Computer Science at the University of Texas at San Antonio, Smriti was brought on by Texas A&M University–San Antonio as an Assistant Professor. Her passion and belief in the WiCyS mission drove her to encourage her students to apply to attend the 2019 WiCyS conference on scholarship. That year, she attended on a faculty scholarship and accompanied four undergraduate students to the conference in Pittsburgh.

This experience was transformative for Smriti's students, who were sincerely inspired by the abundance of opportunities within the cybersecurity field. They returned from the conference with newfound enthusiasm, and they established a WiCyS chapter at Texas A&M–San Antonio. Smriti served as their faculty co-advisor, mentoring and supporting the students as they built a robust community on campus.

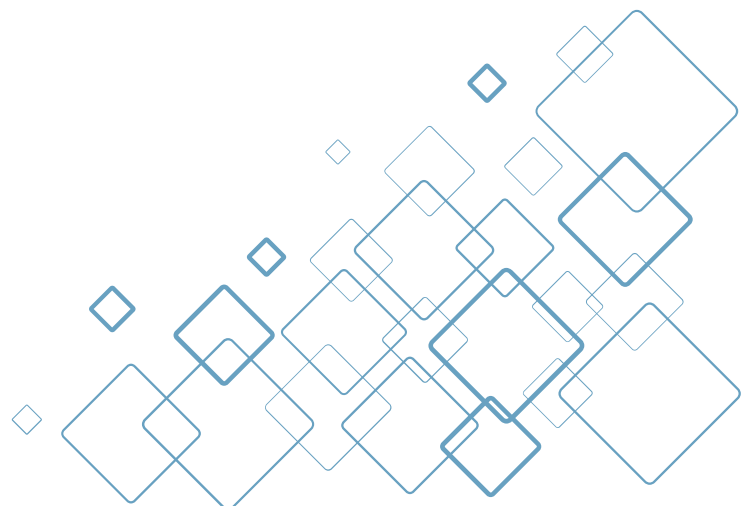
In the fall of 2021, Smriti transitioned to a new role as an Assistant Professor at Purdue University. She discovered an established WiCyS chapter there and eagerly joined as a co-advisor. She attended the 2021 WiCyS conference with over 20 Purdue students, all of whom received scholarships. Seeing her former students from Texas A&M at the conference, now thriving and successful in their careers, reinforced the significant impact of her mentorship.

## Smriti Bhatt's Cybersecurity Journey: Harnessing the Power of Mentorship

A highlight of the 2022 conference was Smriti's opportunity to present and share her story on stage—an experience she had never imagined possible. In the following years, Smriti attended the 2023 and 2024 WiCyS conferences as a new mom, skillfully balancing her professional and personal life.

WiCyS has been a cornerstone in Smriti's journey, helping her build the confidence needed to thrive in her career. Smriti's story is not just about her own growth but also about the ripple effect of her efforts on her students. Witnessing her former students succeed and continue to engage with WiCyS conferences is a profound reward that represents the generational shift and the enduring impact of the WiCyS community.

As Smriti continues to share her story and inspire others, she highlights the importance of representation and the power of community in building resilient and confident cybersecurity professionals. Her journey is a powerful reminder that with the right support, one can achieve great heights and, in turn, lift others along the way.



## How WiCyS Empowered Dalal Alharthi's Cybersecurity Leadership Journey



“Through WiCyS, I've been able to **lead, inspire and empower the next generation of women in cybersecurity**, transforming challenges into opportunities and mentorship into lasting impact. What began as a search for belonging turned into a journey of leadership, mentorship and meaningful connection. I found a community that not only welcomed my story but **empowered me to use it to uplift others and drive change** in cybersecurity.”

**Dalal Alharthi**  
*Assistant Professor, University of Arizona*



When Dalal Alharthi moved from Saudi Arabia to the U.S. with her husband and two children, she was not only navigating a demanding academic schedule but also adjusting to life in a new country. With English that wasn't yet strong and a multidisciplinary background that spanned both technical and leadership roles, Dalal faced the challenge of adapting to a new academic culture while continuing her career trajectory. That's when she discovered the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization.

Dalal's journey began with a Bachelor's in Computer Science from Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University, followed by a Master's in Public Administration from King Saud University, during which she published several papers on leadership and public administration. She began her career as a programmer at PNU, then served as a director at the Ministry of Civil Service and later became a lecturer at Shaqra University. Eventually, she earned a scholarship to pursue further studies in the U.S. "When I first came here, my English wasn't very strong and I had two young children," she shared. "It wasn't just the language barrier; it was reconnecting with technical concepts and navigating a new system." Her academic path led her to the University of California, Irvine, where she completed both a Master's and a PhD in Computer Science.

While working toward her PhD, Dalal welcomed her third child and held engineering roles at Farmers Insurance, Palo Alto Networks and Dell Technologies. But it was a casual conversation with a fellow student that would redirect her future: "We started talking about WiCyS and ended up co-founding the Student Chapter at UC Irvine," Dalal recalled. That decision brought clarity and a new sense of purpose. "WiCyS reinforced my commitment to cybersecurity and opened new doors for growth," she said. "I took extra courses, completed a cybersecurity bootcamp and refined my research direction. It came at a time when I was juggling motherhood, language barriers and high academic expectations. The timing couldn't have been better."

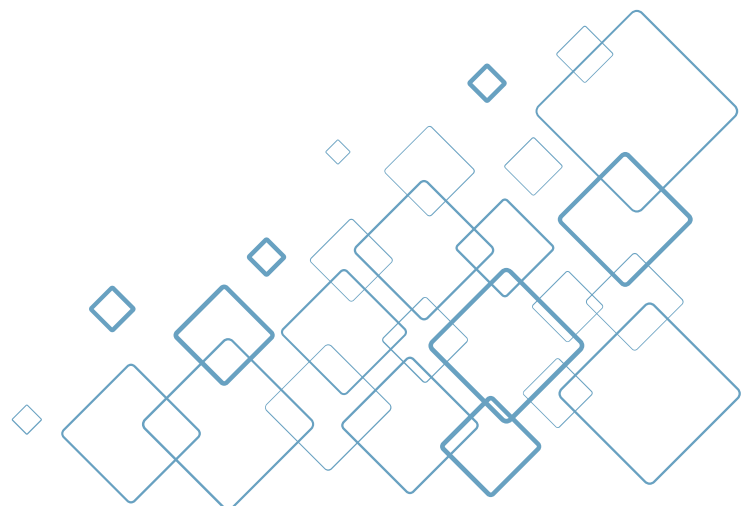
## How WiCyS Empowered **Dalal Alharthi's** Cybersecurity Leadership Journey

Dalal's involvement in WiCyS quickly grew. After serving in student leadership, she became Vice President of the WiCyS Farmers Insurance Affiliate. Today, as an Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona, she's established a new WiCyS chapter to support and empower her students. Her journey with the organization continued through hands-on opportunities, such as the AWS Security Competition. "It gave me a chance to work with others on applied cloud security challenges in a fun and supportive environment, adding a new dimension to my industry background." Most recently, Dalal was selected for the WiCyS Speaker Spotlight Program, where she now inspires others through public speaking. "WiCyS gives women like me a platform—not just to learn, but to lead," she said. "I've built confidence, improved my communication skills and connected with like-minded women from all over the world."

For Dalal, WiCyS has been more than just a stepping stone in her professional development; it's a source of belonging. "The passion people have for cybersecurity and growing the workforce is incredible," she said. "Everyone is so welcoming. You meet people who share your interests and keep collaborating long after the conference ends. That's something truly unique about WiCyS."

Though Dalal now works in academia, she continues to bridge research and industry through her WiCyS network. "I've presented at the WiCyS Conference for the past two years and even launched research projects with students I met there," she shared. She also mentors underrepresented students, leads multi-institutional research efforts and is driving innovation in AI-based cloud forensics.

WiCyS has played a powerful role in amplifying Dalal's voice, expanding her impact and connecting her with a global community of changemakers. While the organization has served as a catalyst in her journey, it's Dalal's leadership, resilience and vision that continue to shape the future of cybersecurity."



## Opening Doors to New Opportunities: How WiCyS Kickstarted **Rianat Abbas's** Cybersecurity Journey



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“Becoming a member of WiCyS has been both *eye-opening and door-opening* for me. Coming to the United States from Nigeria, where cybersecurity wasn't yet a rising industry, I initially perceived it as a male-dominated field that seemed inaccessible due to its technical nature. WiCyS *shattered my preconceived notions*, broadened my horizons and provided me with the resources and encouragement I needed to thrive as a student in the field. Wherever I venture in my career, I recognize that my journey began here, with WiCyS.”

### **Rianat Abbas**

*WiCyS Student Member & MSIS '25 Candidate at Hankamer School of Business, Baylor University*



In the ever-evolving cybersecurity landscape, women often find themselves navigating challenges, barriers or uncertainties. For Rianat Abbas, a Nigerian native currently pursuing her master's degree in information systems at Baylor University, the journey into cybersecurity was catalyzed by the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization.

Originating from Nigeria, where cybersecurity hadn't yet gained prominence, Rianat initially perceived the field as male-dominated and technically daunting. However, a personal encounter with identity theft ignited her interest, prompting her to delve into the intricacies of the cyber world. Before joining WiCyS, Rianat was trapped in a cycle of confusion, unsure of where to begin. Despite taking a few cybersecurity courses, she lacked the motivation and confidence to complete them and struggled to see how they could translate into a cybersecurity career. Transitioning from a background in product design, Rianat found herself at a crossroads, grappling with the scarcity of resources and mentorship opportunities tailored to her needs.

That's when she discovered WiCyS—a moment that marked the beginning of her journey from product designer to cybersecurity student. WiCyS served as both an eye-opener and a door-opener for Rianat, challenging her preconceptions, expanding her horizons and equipping her with the resources and support she needed to excel in a traditionally male-dominated industry.

After officially joining WiCyS in January 2024, Rianat experienced a significant shift in perspective; she found it eye-opening to discover the multitude of domains within cybersecurity, realizing she didn't have to solely focus on the technical aspects. Moreover, she described shedding her imposter syndrome and feeling more confident, as WiCyS provided her with a clear path to transfer her skills from product management into cybersecurity. This newfound clarity left her feeling relieved and empowered, as she finally felt she knew what she was doing. Within just two months of joining WiCyS, Rianat's mind was blown by the opportunities and insights it offered.

When WiCyS introduced the ISC2 certification program, Rianat seized the opportunity with

# Opening Doors to New Opportunities: How WiCyS Kickstarted **Rianat Abbas's** Cybersecurity Journey

enthusiasm. Encouraged by the determination she witnessed among fellow women in the WiCyS community, she found the courage to undertake her ISC2 Exams, ultimately achieving her certification with flying colors in February 2024. WiCyS not only equipped Rianat with a clear path to leveraging her certifications in a cybersecurity career but also fostered a supportive community that celebrated diversity and inclusion and embraced her as a new addition to the field. Through this nurturing network, Rianat found doors opening to fresh opportunities. In February 2024, she orchestrated a collaboration among WiCyS members she had previously connected with, inviting them to participate in the 2024 Social Engineering Competition at Temple University—a venture made possible solely through Rianat's access to the WiCyS community. Now, emboldened by her experiences, Rianat actively engages in initiatives to propel her cybersecurity career forward, including pursuing a scholarship to attend the 2024 RSA Conference in San Francisco, California.

Rianat is now driven by a desire to pay forward her journey and ignite change within the cybersecurity industry. Upon joining WiCyS, she observed women sharing their stories, knowledge, and paths, feeling inspired to forge her own. Now, she aims to extend that support to other women considering entering the cybersecurity landscape. By guiding them to the WiCyS organization, she hopes to provide them with the same opportunities she herself received.

Rianat gratefully acknowledges and celebrates the transformative influence of Women in Cybersecurity (WiCyS) on her career trajectory. WiCyS emerged as a beacon of opportunity and empowerment, offering Rianat a structured pathway to leverage her product management skills, access conferences, attain certifications, secure scholarships and forge invaluable connections with like-minded individuals. The tangible impact of WiCyS on Rianat's journey echoes as she recounts her milestones within the community, from achieving certifications to actively engaging in Capture the Flag competitions alongside fellow WiCyS members. Furthermore, WiCyS instilled in her the spirit of paying it forward, inspiring her to advocate for the inclusion of other women in cybersecurity and strive to ensure they too are equipped with the same opportunities she embraced.

"Wherever I venture in my career," Rianat reflects, "I recognize that my journey began here, with WiCyS." Rianat's evolution from product designer to cybersecurity student stands as a testament to the transformative force of WiCyS's inclusive community and the limitless prospects it extends to individuals committed to excellence in the cybersecurity landscape.

## Unlocking Potential through the Power of Support: **Silvia Patricia González-Villaseñor's** WiCyS Experience



“WiCyS has truly changed my life in ways I never imagined possible. The sense of **community, mentorship and empowerment** I've found within WiCyS has profoundly impacted my life. WiCyS' unwavering support has fueled my personal growth, inspiring me to pursue a career in cybersecurity. This sense of community—knowing I have a network of like-minded women who support and uplift each other—has made **a world of difference.**”

**Silvia Patricia González-Villaseñor**  
*WiCyS 2024 Student Scholarship Awardee*



In the ever-evolving landscape of cybersecurity, where women frequently face underrepresentation, the presence of a nurturing community can wield transformative power. Silvia Patricia González-Villaseñor discovered this transformative force through her affiliation with the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization. WiCyS, a bastion of support and empowerment for women in the field, provided Silvia with the camaraderie she had long sought, offering invaluable opportunities to build professional connections and cultivate networks of like-minded, supportive individuals.

A recipient of the prestigious 2024 WiCyS conference student scholarship, Silvia's reflections echo the profound impact of her experience within the WiCyS community. In a heartfelt letter addressed to the WiCyS Conference Team, she pours out her gratitude, emphasizing how the organization has fundamentally reshaped her career trajectory.

At the heart of Silvia's gratitude lies an acknowledgment of the profound influence WiCyS has had on her life. The organization's commitment to fostering inclusivity and empowerment in cybersecurity has opened doors and shattered barriers, allowing Silvia to realize her full potential in the field. The support extended to her by WiCyS is more than just financial; it is a catalyst for growth, empowerment and belonging. Silvia highlights the importance of having a network of like-minded women who uplift and support each other—a sentiment echoed by many women in cybersecurity who often navigate male-dominated spaces.

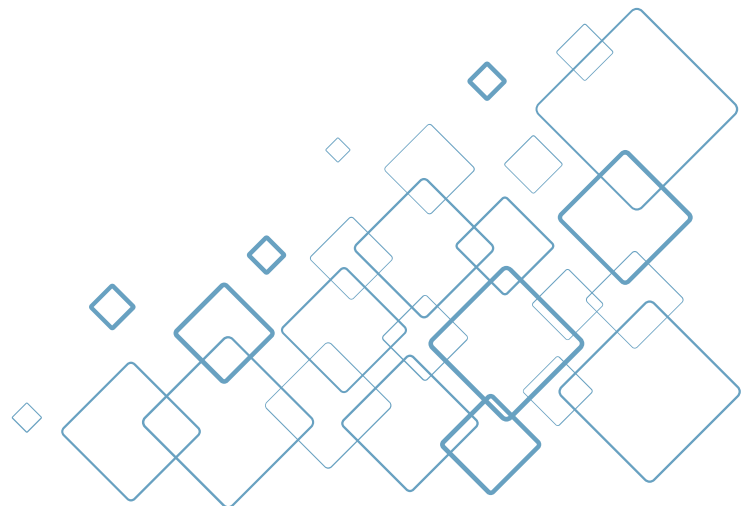
Eagerly anticipating the WiCyS 2024 Conference in Nashville, TN, Silvia took to LinkedIn to share her excitement. With scholarship in hand, she looks forward to once again immersing herself in the vibrant atmosphere of WiCyS. Her enthusiasm is palpable as she mentions working on her “packing list of ideas and excitement.” For Silvia, WiCyS transcends the label of a mere conference; it serves as a platform to connect with inspiring leaders, explore cutting-edge technology and amplify the voices of women in cybersecurity.

As Silvia gears up for the 2024 conference, she finds herself reflecting on the journey that brought her to this point. Back in 2017, as a newcomer to the conference and working in STEM

# Unlocking Potential through the Power of Support: **Silvia Patricia González-Villaseñor's** WiCyS Experience

and coding within elementary education, Silvia harbored uncertainties about the role of cybersecurity in her life. However, with each subsequent annual attendance, her enthusiasm and self-confidence grew, motivating her to reach greater heights within the field. From her initial interest in cybersecurity to her determination to make a difference in the field, WiCyS has consistently served as a guiding light, illuminating her path forward.

As we celebrate Silvia Patricia González-Villaseñor's journey to the 2024 WiCyS conference, we are reminded of the profound impact of community and support. WiCyS stands as a beacon of hope for women in cybersecurity, providing them a platform to flourish, connect and leave their mark in a field ripe for change. For Silvia, WiCyS is more than just a conference—it's a lifeline, an endless source of inspiration and a testament to the boundless potential of women in cybersecurity.



## Lucija Koprivc's Rise from Capture the Flag Competitions to Cybersecurity Success



“WiCyS has provided me with invaluable learning opportunities and a supportive community that have **greatly contributed to my personal and professional growth**. Through my participation in the WiCyS Target Cyber Defense Challenge, I've built meaningful connections with other women in the field and **gained confidence in my abilities**. The encouragement and shared experiences within the WiCyS community have inspired me to embrace new challenges in cybersecurity and remain committed to continuous learning.”

**Lucija Koprivc**  
Cyber Security Intern



Lucija Koprivc discovered her passion for cybersecurity in 2020 during the global pandemic. As a Mathematics and Computer Science student at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, she was drawn to the problem-solving and technical challenges of Capture the Flag (CTF) competitions. What started as a fun activity with friends soon became a driving force in her career aspirations.

Without a formal cybersecurity program at her university, Lucija sought opportunities to expand her knowledge. “I didn't start out studying cybersecurity,” she recalls. “My university didn't offer a dedicated program in the field, but participating in CTFs ignited my interest. I wanted to see how I could turn that interest into a career.” Determined to grow her skills, she went on to represent Slovenia in the European Cybersecurity Challenge, an experience that further solidified her passion for the field.

Lucija soon realized that pursuing a career in cybersecurity would require more than just passion—it required access to resources, education and a supportive community. That's when she discovered Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS), an organization dedicated to recruiting, retaining and advancing women in the field. Joining WiCyS became a turning point in her journey, providing her with the mentorship, resources and sense of belonging she had been searching for.

One of Lucija's most impactful experiences with WiCyS was participating in the Target Cyber Defense Challenge. “It was unlike anything I had done before,” she shares. The multi-tiered program tested her technical abilities and problem-solving skills in real-world scenarios. Lucija rose to the challenge, advancing through each rigorous challenge and placing first in the competition. “It was tough but rewarding. The organizers from Target were incredibly supportive, and the camaraderie among participants made the experience even more valuable,” she recalls.

Beyond technical growth, WiCyS provided Lucija with a global network of like-minded women who shared their experiences, advice and encouragement.

## Lucija Koprivc's Rise from Capture the Flag Competitions to Cybersecurity Success

Engaging in Slack channels and Discord servers, she found inspiration in their stories, reinforcing her commitment to continuous learning and tackling new challenges in cybersecurity. "Hearing the stories of other women in the field was incredibly motivating. It reminded me that I wasn't alone in facing obstacles or self-doubt," she shares.

For Lucija, WiCyS became more than just a professional development platform—it was a confidence builder. "WiCyS helped me believe in myself and my potential," she says. "I had the passion for cybersecurity, but WiCyS gave me the affirmation and encouragement I needed to pursue it as a career."

Inspired by her experience with WiCyS, Lucija sought to give back to her local community in Slovenia. She played a key role in establishing Women4Cyber, an organization dedicated to empowering and supporting Slovenian women interested in cybersecurity. Through this initiative, she hopes to cultivate the same sense of community and encouragement she found in WiCyS, creating opportunities for women to learn, grow and connect while helping to strengthen the cybersecurity workforce.

Alongside her advocacy work, Lucija is a cybersecurity intern focused on safeguarding critical systems and data. Looking ahead, she plans to pursue a Master's degree in cybersecurity to deepen her expertise and continue advancing in the field. "My internship has been an incredible learning experience and has shown me that there's so much more to explore in cybersecurity," she says. "WiCyS has taught me the value of continuous learning and taking on new challenges, so I'm excited about what's next."

To those considering a career in cybersecurity, Lucija offers this advice: "Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone. Whether it's joining a CTF competition, applying for a program or reaching out for mentorship, these experiences will help you grow. Most importantly, find a community like WiCyS that will support and uplift you along the way."

Lucija's story is a testament to the transformative power of passion, determination and community. From discovering cybersecurity during the pandemic to excelling in the Target Cyber Defense Challenge and now advocating for women entering the field, her story reflects the profound impact of WiCyS in empowering women to succeed and contribute to the future of cybersecurity.

## Rashmi Bharathan's Mission to Empower the Next Generation of Cybersecurity Leaders



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“WiCyS has been an incredible platform for me to grow both as a mentor and an entrepreneur. Through WiCyS, I have had the opportunity to mentor aspiring cybersecurity professionals, helping them navigate their careers and empowering them with the right resources and connections. Additionally, WiCyS has inspired my entrepreneurial journey, providing insights and networking opportunities that have fueled my passion for innovation in cybersecurity and beyond. The supportive community and wealth of knowledge at WiCyS continue to shape my path as a leader in the industry.”

### Rashmi Bharathan

*Graduate Student, University of Illinois  
Urbana-Champaign*



For Rashmi Bharathan, WiCyS is more than a professional network; it's a catalyst for change. With over 13 years of IT experience across retail, pharmaceutical and finance industries, she has built a strong foundation in technology and leadership. Her career has included roles such as Dotcom Support Specialist, ITSM Specialist, IT Auditor, Configuration Audit Manager and Senior Analyst. Now, as an international MBA student at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Rashmi is combining her technical expertise with business strategy to prepare for her goal of becoming a product manager in cybersecurity.

Rashmi's journey with WiCyS began in early 2024 when she joined the WiCyS Global Mentorship Program as a mentor. It was this program, she says, that first drew her to the community. "It's a space designed to empower women to ask questions, share challenges and grow together," she shares. Through one-on-one coaching, career advice and technical mentorship, Rashmi has guided women in cybersecurity through pivotal career transitions. Over the past two years, she has mentored six WiCyS members, helping them gain clarity, confidence and direction. In doing so, she's strengthened her own leadership skills and found immense fulfillment in giving back.

Mentorship quickly became central to Rashmi's journey, both within WiCyS and across the broader cybersecurity community. As the Student Initiative and Volunteering Engagement Director at the Information Systems Security Association (ISSA), she supports more than 250 students, helping them secure internships, writing recommendations and coaching them through the challenges of early career development. Since 2022, she has also mentored through the Information Systems Audit and Control Association (ISACA) and serves as Social Committee Chair at The Institute of Internal Auditors Inc., where she organizes events that build community and collaboration among members.

For Rashmi, this work is deeply personal. She believes students hold immense potential but often lose confidence when opportunities are scarce. By providing access to internships and professional networks, she helps them build the foundations of their careers, reducing stress and opening doors that might otherwise remain closed. This commitment to uplifting others recently

## Rashmi Bharathan's Mission to Empower the Next Generation of Cybersecurity Leaders

earned her recognition as Volunteer of the Year from the International Information Systems Security Association (ISSA).

Networking is one of Rashmi's greatest strengths, and WiCyS has given her a platform to amplify it. From attending conferences to building meaningful relationships across the community, she has found countless ways to learn from others, share her own expertise and grow alongside fellow cybersecurity professionals. At the 2024 WiCyS Conference in Dallas, Rashmi connected with women leaders across the country, expanded her LinkedIn network and sparked ideas for future student-focused workshops. She has also attended WiCyS Chicago Affiliate events and is eager to grow her involvement at the local level.

While giving back fuels much of her work, Rashmi is also clear about her own goals. She envisions herself as a product manager in the cybersecurity space, where she can combine her technical knowledge with her passion for leadership and innovation. WiCyS continues to be a driving force in helping her move toward her dream role. By connecting her with industry leaders, providing professional development opportunities and fostering a community of support, the organization has been instrumental in shaping her career trajectory.

For Rashmi, WiCyS represents more than career advancement; it's a place where leaders are built, ideas flourish and the future of cybersecurity is shaped collectively. Her journey reflects the power of mentorship and the ripple effect of one woman's dedication to uplifting others. As she often reminds her mentees: "WiCyS is not just a community. It is a catalyst for change."



## Udochukwu Nwandikom's Pursuit of Peace and Purpose in Cybersecurity



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“I'm grateful for the chance encounter that led me to WiCyS. Even with a master's in software and security engineering, I knew I was missing something essential: mentorship. As the only woman in my program, I longed for female mentors who could understand my experiences. WiCyS gave me exactly that: a **supportive community** of women in cybersecurity whose guidance, insights and encouragement have been invaluable to my growth. Through the strategic partner webinars and global network, I've **gained the confidence and clarity to take the next step in my cybersecurity journey.**”

**Udochukwu Nwandikom**

*Graduate Student, Texas Tech University*



Her name means peace. And fittingly, for Udochukwu Nwandikom, finding WiCyS brought a sense of peace and purpose to her cybersecurity journey.

Udochukwu holds a Master of Science in Software and Security Engineering from Texas Tech University, where she was often the only woman in her classes. Despite her academic success, she felt something was missing—mentorship, representation and a sense of belonging. After earning her degree, she wanted to pursue a cybersecurity career but found the job search overwhelming. “I had the education,” she explained, “but I didn't know where to begin.” Unsure of her next move, she decided to continue her education and is now a Research Assistant and PhD student in Computer Science at Texas Tech.

A “stroke of luck” changed Udochukwu's path last year when she came across the Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS) organization through a university-wide email. Intrigued by the opportunity to connect with other women in cybersecurity, she joined and quickly discovered the mentorship, opportunities and encouragement she had been missing.

The WiCyS 2025 Conference in Dallas, Texas, marked her first-ever cybersecurity conference, and it was a defining experience. She describes it in one word: inspiring. The event opened her eyes to the wide range of opportunities available in the field, from research and programming to industry applications she hadn't realized existed. She pushed herself to join her first-ever Capture the Flag (CTF) competition, a daunting but transformative experience. “It was intimidating at first, but incredibly rewarding,” she reflected. The hands-on challenge deepened her understanding of applied cybersecurity concepts and built her confidence in practical problem-solving.

Throughout the conference, Udochukwu seized every opportunity to learn and connect. She met representatives from WiCyS Strategic Partner Sandia National Laboratories, an especially meaningful encounter, since she had written a paper extending one of Sandia's research publications. Discussing her work with their team deepened her interest in the intersection of AI and cybersecurity.

## Udochukwu Nwandikom's Pursuit of Peace and Purpose in Cybersecurity

The conference's career fair also became a pivotal moment. Determined to make the most of it, Udochukwu visited every booth, engaging sponsors in conversations about their research, hiring practices and the future of AI in security. "It was fascinating to see what industries are actually doing," she said. Several companies followed up with her after the event, a sign, she believes, that she's on the right path.

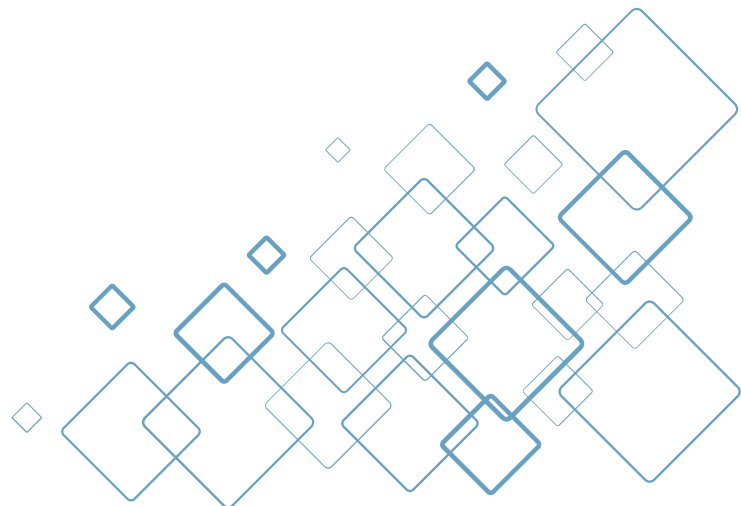
Now researching the intersection of AI and cybersecurity, Udochukwu is passionate about bridging the gap between academic theory and industry application. Through WiCyS strategic partner webinars, she's learned how organizations apply cybersecurity solutions to evolving threats. The webinars, she says, help her connect classroom theory with real-world execution, giving her a clearer picture of where her research fits within the broader industry landscape. Hearing from professionals, especially women who transitioned into cybersecurity from other fields, has been both motivating and grounding for her.

"I see WiCyS as a bridge between where I am and where I want to go," she said. "It connects academic knowledge with real-world experience and makes it all feel possible."

Encouraged by her experience, Udochukwu is now working to establish a WiCyS student chapter at Texas Tech University to help other women discover the same sense of belonging she did. She also plans to participate in future WiCyS programming, including the Target Cyber Defense Challenge, to continue applying her skills beyond academia.

"WiCyS is an opportunity to grow, discover and have fun," she shared. "It's a miracle to have women around to learn from and laugh with."

For Udochukwu, WiCyS has been more than a professional network; it's been a turning point. From feeling uncertain about her path after graduate school to confidently shaping her future in cybersecurity, she has found clarity, confidence and community. And as she puts it, this is only the beginning of her WiCyS story.





# SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR WiCyS Strategic Partners

Thank you to our Strategic Partners, the WiCyS ecosystem that invests in the most valuable and expensive asset in cybersecurity: **its people.**

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**Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS)** is a nonprofit organization with international reach dedicated to the recruitment, retention and advancement of women in cybersecurity. WiCyS was founded by Dr. Ambareen Siraj in 2013 through a National Science Foundation grant awarded to Tennessee Tech University. In less than 10 years, it has grown into an organization (est. in 2017) representing a leading alliance between trailblazers from academia, government and industry. WiCyS offers opportunities, trainings, events and resources for its members.

To learn more about the WiCyS organization, visit [www.wicys.org](http://www.wicys.org)

### **Interested in sharing your own WiCyS Story?**

Please complete the form on the WiCyS website with your information and reflections on how WiCyS has contributed to your professional growth or provided life-changing experiences. [www.wicys.org/about/wicys-stories](http://www.wicys.org/about/wicys-stories)

