



# 2024 WICYS STORIES

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





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Welcome to the launch of the **“WiCyS Stories”** series, celebrating the life-changing impact of the WiCyS community and recognizing the diverse 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 an inclusive 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 championing diversity and strengthening an inclusive cybersecurity workforce.



# Breaking Barriers & Forging New Frontiers: Annie Jamshed's Trailblazing Cybersecurity 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

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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.



# Hannah Rapetti's Journey to Empowerment in Cybersecurity



“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

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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.



## Christine'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

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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' 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' 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 Transformed Alexis Watters' 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' 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' 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.



# 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.

## 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.



## 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'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'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.





# SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR WiCyS Strategic Partners

Special thanks to our WiCyS Strategic Partners for their continued investment in WiCyS, enabling us to support the most valuable asset in cybersecurity: **its people.**

*Special Thanks*

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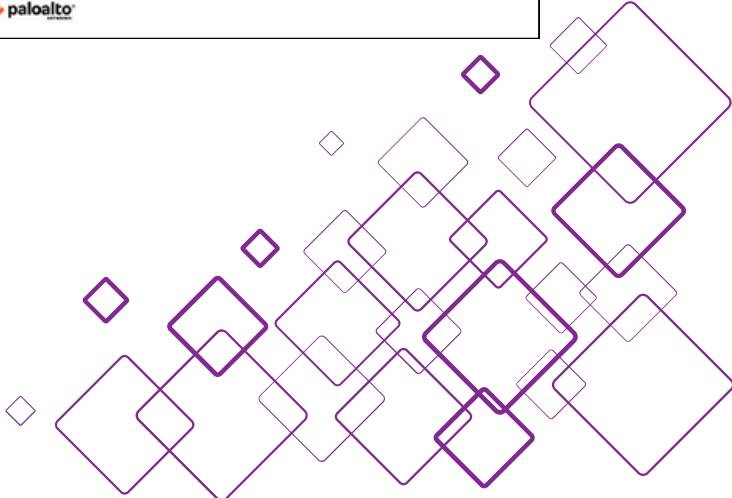
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**Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS)** is a nonprofit organization with international reach dedicated to the recruitment, retention and advancement of women in cybersecurity. WiCyS was founded by Dr. Ambareen Siraj in 2013 through a National Science Foundation 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/)

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