

Single Mother Returns to School, Texas

Student Impact Story: Tarrant County College, Northeast

“Anything worth having is worth working hard for. Many people get discouraged, needing to stay in their comfort zone, not believing they can do something new. The first time I [passed] a hands-on skills exam, the feeling of accomplishment was indescribable. If I can learn the things I’ve learned, then anyone can do it.”



As an adult, do you bring your dreams and ambitions with you when you return to school, or do you find them there? When Valerie Waites first stepped into a Cisco® Networking Academy® lab, she felt a sense of excitement that took her completely by surprise.

After all, Valerie had almost no experience with technology. At the age of 31, she was a single mom working hard to support her 11-year old daughter and 7-year old son. With only a high school education and no professional training, Valerie’s work options were limited. She was tired

of struggling to find jobs as a waitress and department store associate. The hours were long, the pay was poor, the opportunities for advancement were nonexistent, and there was no sense of job security. Valerie was determined to provide greater security for her children.

With the support and encouragement of her daughter and son, in 2004 Valerie enrolled at Tarrant County College (TCC), Northeast, located between Fort Worth and Dallas, Texas. On her first day, a counselor at TCC gave Valerie a tour of the campus, part of the school’s policy of exposing new students to as many edu-

cational options as possible. While Valerie had no idea what courses she might take, she had never considered a career in technology until she stepped into the Cisco lab and was introduced to the students and instructors.

“I can’t explain it, but I was instantly drawn to what they were working on in the lab.”

With little idea of what she was getting into, Valerie signed up for Cisco Networking Academy courses. She took the CCNA® (Cisco Certified Networking Associate) course, and passed the difficult certification exam on the first try.



Along the way, Valerie's fascination with the coursework continued to feel surprising.

"I feel so fortunate to have access these wonderful instructors and this material through the academy. Rows and rows of racks with many routers— it is so different from any other classroom. I've even become more competitive. I always try to get the highest scores in the class.

Through the Cisco Networking Academy, I discovered my inner nerd. I had no idea that I had an aptitude for technology. I look forward to learning something new every day. I never dreamed that I would become the most technologically savvy person in the room at family gatherings. My children are proud of me. My mom and dad are proud of me. It's very cool."

Neil Brook is one of Valerie's academy course instructors. He says it is apparent why Valerie excelled. "When you meet Valerie, you quickly realize that she is an exceptional person. She is energetic and filled with enthusiasm. She consistently does great work in the classroom. She is always fully prepared, intelligent, positive, and a leader among her classmates."

Neil says, "I try to address that 'curiosity' element of study that is so important to a student's learning and eventual success. When students are enthusiastic about learning, they acquire knowledge that goes well beyond what an instructor covers in a textbook."

Within two months of getting her CCNA certification, Valerie had a job. Students who have attended Cisco Networking Academy courses and gone on to management positions in companies often look to the academy for recommendations on new hires. Both Neil and Valerie's lab instructor recommended her for her first job.

Valerie supports both the network and the IP phone system for Facility Solutions Group (Austin, TX), and offices at their Dallas campus. She has already worked on redesigning the internal network, going to each site and installing new equipment.

"I work with guys who are all highly trained in their areas of specialty, and they're all very smart. It still surprises me that they don't know all the things that I know about networking. It makes me proud."

A better job enabled her to move her family to a new apartment. But starting a new career did not mean leaving school behind.

"I'm not stopping. I hope I never run out of courses to take. I want to keep up with my studies, as well as learn on the job. Being around the type of people that you find teaching Cisco Networking Academy courses will take you to a different confidence level."

She recently earned her CCNP® (Cisco Certified Networking Professional) certification, and would like to continue on to earn her CCDP® (Cisco Certified Design Professional) certification.

"Some people get discouraged, and others work through it. The first time I took a hands-on skills exam, I was excited and nervous. When it's over and you pass, the feeling of accomplishment is indescribable. Whatever happens, don't get discouraged. Anything worth having is worth working hard for. You see so many people getting discouraged, needing to stay within their comfort zone, not believing they can do something new. It's just not true. If I can learn the things I've learned, then I know anyone can do it."