

# Computer security expert got his start locally

## Speaks at Worcester Economic Club event

By Kimberly Petalas

[Kpetalas@thelandmark.com](mailto:Kpetalas@thelandmark.com)

Aaron Portnoy has been tracking down software vulnerabilities since he was a teenager.

Once a [Holden](#) resident, Portnoy was enrolled at the Mass Academy of Math and Science at [Worcester Polytechnic Institute](#), where he was expelled six months before graduation.

“I was in the Mass Academy of Math and Science at WPI and I hacked the school’s computer system,” he recalled. “I then went to Northeastern for a year. While completing my co-op, I was offered a job and I took it.”

Portnoy said college degrees are not common in his field.

“It was a hobby back in the early 2000s, and now it’s really valuable,” he said. “Nowadays if you find a single flaw in the Firefox browser, you can sell that to someone for \$100,000.”

The [North Brookfield](#) native is the co-founder of Exodus Intelligence, a company that focuses on finding bugs in software that create vulnerable environments for hackers.

Portnoy said his business focuses on reverse engineering, which finds vulnerabilities in software used by large companies, without them knowing it.

By gaining this intelligence, these computer security experts have a few choices when it comes to what to do with the information.

“Having different players, there are some moral and ethical dilemmas,” he said. “You can report the bug to the vendor directly, who might give you a pat on the back or maybe some money for your work. You could sell it to a broker for more money, and then there are gray and black markets.”

Although he focuses more on software bugs, Portnoy gave some insight to recent large company breaches that effect every day consumers.

“Hardly a week is going to go by without some form of a breach, whether it’s announced or not,” he said, speaking about the new way in which hackers are gaining information. “They swipe credit card data where you swipe credit cards. They’re getting more and more innovative.”

Portnoy said that with his presentation to the Worcester Economic Club on Nov. 19, he hopes that many take home a valuable point.

“If you don’t have someone in your company specifically for security, invest in that,” he said. “Larger companies really should have a CSO, or Chief Security Officer. If you don’t, you should assume that you’ll be hacked at one point or another.”

Portnoy said it is costly to invest in defensive measures, but that hacks for larger companies could cost more.

“A hack like Home Depot could cost hundreds of millions of dollars,” he said. “On the other hand, the company could spend thousands in defense. It’s a gamble. Most people learn they need security after they’ve already been hacked.”

Although Portnoy said large companies are more at risk, small and medium-size businesses have options of hiring a security consultant, who would evaluate software similar to that of an energy audit.

“It can be costly and most small businesses are not really at risk,” he said. “You just have to make sure you are protecting your intellectual property.”

Portnoy was recently featured in a cover story on Time Magazine called “World War Zero: How Hackers Fight to Steal Your Secrets,” where he talks about what it is like to be a hacker.

In the article, it states, “The Internet is a battlefield, the prize is your information, and bugs are the weapons.”

Portnoy smirked.

“They say battle zone, I say playground,” he said.

He has also been featured in and quoted by, BBC, Wired, Reuters, NBC, and more.

The Worcester Economic Club is an organization that is comprised of men and women in the [Worcester County](#) area who are dedicated to providing a forum for the open discussion of economic, civic, educational, and sociological subjects.

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