Cyberdefender who cut his teeth in Worcester sounds alarm on hackers

Cyber security expert Aaron Portnoy, left, chats with Jim Paugh, right, president of the Worcester Economic Club, and Jim Barys, a math teacher at the Massachusetts Academy of Math and Science, at the Worcester Economic Club on Wednesday. (T&G Staff/STEVE LANAVA)

By Mark Sullivan CORRESPONDENT

WORCESTER — Cyberattacks are in the news, with recent headlines describing security breaches by hackers targeting State Department and White House computers, the U.S. energy grid, and major retailers.

Time magazine writes: "The Internet is a battlefield, the prize is your information, and bugs are the weapons."

Aaron Portnoy offers a different spin.

"They say battle zone, I say playground," said Mr. Portnoy, co-founder of Exodus Intelligence, an expert at finding security bugs that leave computer systems vulnerable to hacker attacks.

The North Brookfield native, featured in a July 21 Time cover story, addressed a dinner audience of the Worcester Economic Club on Wednesday at the College of the Holy Cross.

"Hardly a week is going to go by without some form of a breach, whether it's announced or not," Mr. Portnoy said in remarks before the event.

He described recent attacks by hackers who accessed point-of-sale systems at Home Depot and Target.

"They swiped credit card data where you swipe credit cards," he said. "They're getting more and more innovative. It's just going to continue."

His firm specializes in what is called reverse engineering, discovering vulnerabilities in software such as browsers and mail clients that are commonly used by large financial institutions and governments.

His team finds ways to break into that software without the user knowing anything happened, and sells that information to clients, who include the manufacturers of anti-virus systems, government and law enforcement.

A lucrative market has sprung up around these bugs or vulnerabilities in software security.

Mr. Portnoy's presentation to Economic Club members focused on a discussion of what he called a "relatively new and unregulated" emerging market in cybersecurity vulnerabilities, and the "ethical and international concerns of selling what are essentially digital weapons."

Mr. Portnoy got his start as a teenager hacking the network of his own school, the Massachusetts Academy of Math and Science in Worcester.

The Time story, headlined "World War Zero: How Hackers Fight to Steal Your Secrets," described Mr. Portnoy's Austin, Texas-based firm as one that "finds and sells bugs, specifically the kind of bugs that could potentially give a third party access to a computer."

Exodus staffers "spend their days banging on software looking for ways in: browsers, email clients, instant-messaging clients, Flash, Java, industrial control systems, anything an attacker could use as an entry point," Time writes.

These vulnerabilities are valuable commodities to criminals or spies planning cyberattacks, and Exodus' clients include security firms and anti-virus vendors who must keep up to speed on the threats out there, Time reports.

Mr. Portnoy was asked about the Wild West feel of his frontier field.

"It was a hobby back in the early 2000s, and now it's really valuable," Mr. Portnoy said. "Nowadays if you find a single flaw in the Firefox browser, you can sell that to someone for $100,000."

His advice to business leaders in an age of hacker attacks: "If they don't have someone who they go to for security questions, they should probably start investing in that, because if they're not, they're already late to the game."

The Worcester Economic Club, founded in 1903, provides professional men and women from Worcester County a forum to discuss economic and civic issues. A speakers series features presentations from financial experts, authors, journalists and others in the realm of business, economics and politics.

Source: Telegram.com