A LOVER (OF ART)
AND A FIGHTER (OF HACKERS)

Certification is fueling the passions of New England teen

BY CALVIN HARPER

Calvin Harper is an associate editor of *Certification Magazine*, and a veteran of the publishing industry.

As a history buff I've often pondered why it is that our nation's quest for independence began in New England. The soil wasn't well-suited for crops, the climate severe, and travel a dangerous endeavor at best. With such disadvantages you would think New Englanders might have been more appreciative of Britain's reassuring embrace.

My best guess it that it had to do with the characteristics of the people. Over the preceding 125 years, those hardy subjects of the crown were nothing but loyal and well-behaved. But they also developed cultural attributes tending to rebelliousness, such as minds open to new ideas, a well-earned confidence in themselves, and the ability to focus on whatever task needed doing.

Prominent New Englanders grew dissatisfied with the short shrift they had been receiving from the Crown and became determined to break away and go it alone. In the beginning, only the four New England colonies were willing to entertain the notion of independence, but over time their ideas and arguments convinced the other nine colonies to join the fight.

Those cultural norms of open-mindedness, confidence and focus not only kicked off the American Experiment, but led to the establishment and growth of the most powerful and richest nation in history. These New England characteristics soon spread across the continent and led to incredible advances. Since 1830, an estimated 85 percent of all scientific inventions and innovations have come from the United States.

Mike Wolf is a modern-day example of that can-do New England spirit. He was born and raised in Connecticut, attends college in Vermont, and works for a company in Massachusetts. He is also a young man with a passion for learning, focused on his IT career and quietly confident about achieving his goals.

Mike, 18, was born and raised in Wethersfield, Conn. Wethersfield is the oldest town in the state and bears the motto Ye Most Auncient Towne in Connecticut. Mike's mother worked in the insurance industry while his father managed a car dealership, and both parents eagerly supported his inquisitiveness and desire to learn by purchasing books on subjects that interested him.

"This enabled me to save my own money for projects I wanted to do," Mike said. And like long-suffering parents of curious children everywhere, they allowed him to disassemble household appliances in order to see how they worked. "They did this even though I would often break them in the process," he said.

Man of many interests

Mike is also an unassuming individual, quietly confident about accomplishments and plans. At an age when most young people are thinking only of dating and school, Mike said his greatest challenge thus far has been to, "Find out what I want to do with my life and the type of person I want to be."

Mike is a nonconformist, opting to buck conventional wisdom and formulate his own opinions and ideas.

"Regardless of what others think, I like to study and think things through for myself," he said. "I like people who stand on their own convictions. I might not always agree with them, but I respect anyone that formulates their own opinions and viewpoints."

Originally fascinated with science and living things, Mike wanted to be a microbiologist. During middle school, an infatuation with fish and other forms of marine life made him consider a career in marine biology. "I loved fish and had tanks in every room in the house," he said.

Mike's ultimate career choice came clearly into focus only after a teacher recommended he join the school's tech club. He was open-minded and soon realized that he not only liked information technology, but had an affinity for computers as well. "They came naturally to me," he said. "I was really good with computers and had no problem learning these skills."

school's program that enrolled students in certification classes for free. He again thought things through and determined that a certification would develop his IT skills and enable him to obtain "higher paying jobs in the future." He earned his CompTIA A+ certification and is currently working on his Network+.

As a sophomore, Mike was a member of the school team that won the SkillsUSA competition for the state. He also has an interest in the environment and natural resources. During his junior year, his team participated in NCF-Envirothon, an environmentally themed competition for high school students.

Envirothon combines in-class and hands-on environmental education in a competition setting that involves problem-solving presentations and written field tests. Student teams are tested on five core environmental subjects — aquatic ecology, forestry, soils

> ❝ **Mike's ultimate career choice came clearly into focus only after a teacher recommended he join the school's tech club. He was open-minded and soon realized that he not only liked information technology, but had an affinity for computers as well.**

Computer skills and certification

While attending Howell Cheney Technical High School in nearby Manchester, Mike's IT skills landed him a job with a local company forensically cleaning computers to remove files and other confidential information. Mike said he enjoyed the job and learned an important life lesson: "Don't complain. Show up every day with a smile on your face and no matter what, get the job done."

Mike also learned about the

and land use, and wildlife, in addition to a random subtopic focusing on relevant environmental issues.

More than 500,000 students across the U.S. and Canada participate in the competition, and Mike's team won second place in the state. "I really enjoyed Envirothon," he said. "I like being outdoors and appreciate timber, wildlife, fish and plants. The goal of the competition was to develop a plan to make environmental resources sustainable so that future generations can enjoy them like we do."

Cybersecurity whiz

During his senior year of high school, Mike became interested in IT security and began working as a freelancer for Vulsec, a Boston-based computer security company that helps banks and casinos assess and remediate IT risks.

"Mike was more advanced in his skills, knowledge and experience than other young people I had worked with," said Vulsec's founder, Andrew Ostashen. "He has a drive and a passion for IT security, just goes for what he wants to achieve no matter what roadblocks get in front of him."

Mike's career goals include earning a security certification, becoming a cybersecurity team lead, and fighting off the bad guys. "I enjoy working in IT security," he said. "There are so many aspects to security, and every company and set-up is unique. It's a new challenge every time."

Mike is currently attending Champlain College in Burlington, Vt., studying for a degree in Computer Networking and Cyber Security "I like the learning environment at Champlain," he said. "Class sizes are small and I get to focus on classes in my major."

Patron of the arts

As if school and work aren't enough to keep him busy, Mike is also an entrepreneur. He is the CEO of Artify.today, a fledgling venture to revolutionize how art is bought and sold. Although normally a quiet individual, Mike gets excited talking about Artify — an Uber-like platform connecting art lovers and artists across the country, and eventually the world.

"We build an art interest profile for patrons, and they are able to view and purchase pieces from galleries and have it shipped to you," said Mike. "We are currently developing a virtual gallery system that enables artists and consumers to set up a custom gallery online to provide a unique social experience with art lovers around the world."

The idea for Artify came about as Mike saw lots of artists on campus struggling to gain exposure and market themselves. "I realized galleries actually restrict customer access. How can people know of art and buy it if they don't see it? I want to provide customers a virtual experience so they can see a piece to scale before they buy it, and see how it might look in their home."

To help himself relax, Mike runs 3-to-5 miles several times a week as a way to clear his mind and stay fit. He also enjoys snowboarding, mountain biking, photography, and hanging out with friends when time permits.

Make certification great again

Like every person who earns an IT certification, Mike has a few thoughts on improving the process. "Certifications need to be more accessible to students in high school. If my school hadn't had the program I never would have heard of certification," he said. "Schools need more funding for IT programs to enable interested students to learn these skills."

He also wants to see more funding for exam vouchers. "Exams are expensive. My class only had vouchers for 3 or 4 licenses, so our teacher had to approve you to take the exam. With limited licenses there was a lot of pressure to pass the exam."

Mike also has some sage advice for other young people studying IT. "Certification really helped make me marketable to an employer. It can help anyone. Focus on putting the work in now so that you're able to reap the benefits later. It might seem like a lot of work upfront, but it pays off in the long run and you'll be happy you did it."

> "As if school and work aren't enough to keep him busy, Mike is also an entrepreneur. He is the CEO of Artify. today, a fledgling venture to revolutionize how art is bought and sold.