Kris Virtue, Vice President of Cybersecurity for Qualcomm (NASDAQ: QCOM), has been named the 2023 Cybersecurity Executive of the Year.

“Kris mobilizes industry, academia and government to increase San Diego’s regional cyber resiliency; seed and diversify the talent pipeline; and drive collaborative cyber innovation,” said Lisa Easterly, one of six judges for the award.

Easterly has gotten to know the virtues of Virtue first-hand in her position as president and CEO of the Cyber Center of Excellence (CCEO). Virtue is a founding officer and the current co-chair of the San Diego-based nonprofit, whose missions are to grow the regional cyber economy and create a more secure digital community.

“Kris is a dedicated cyber industry champion and is highly passionate about his work,” Easterly said, noting that his achievements also include raising regional cybersecurity awareness with small business programs in the cities of San Diego, Carlsbad and Vista, as well as the recently launched San Diego Regional Cyber Lab; strengthening national security innovation through leadership in the State of California’s CADENCE grant consortium as a member of the DoD’s Defense Manufacturing Communities Support Program; and partnering with the U.S. Department of Defense and regional partners to create infrastructure-championed challenges to source collaborative solutions from industry and academia.

Keeping the Qual-Calm

Virtue – yes, that is his real name, and yes, he does live up to it – by the way also has one of the most difficult full-time jobs in San Diego. He leads Qualcomm’s Global Information Security and Risk Management divisions, overseeing information security capabilities and efforts within the Fortune 500 company and ensuring that its digital information assets and systems are protected.

“It’s always a challenge just to keep up with the pace of Qualcomm, kind of running as fast as we can all the time,” Virtue told the San Diego Business Journal during a Zoom call, noting that he was “super, super honored” to receive this award from the SDBJ, especially because it represents recognition from his peers.

“But security is really a team sport,” he said, “and the thing I’m most proud of us that we’ve built a team of really strong individuals who are up to the task.”

That task is a huge one. The FBI reports a 300% increase in cybercrimes across all industries since 2020, with the global cost of data breaches climbing over $4.4 million. Pair that with the global shortage of cybersecurity professionals to thwart these attacks – to the tune of 660,000 lion. Pair that with the global cost of data breaches climbing over $4.4 million. Pair that with the global shortage of cybersecurity professionals to thwart these attacks – to the tune of 660,000.

A Fateful Offer

While majoring in computer science at UC San Diego, Virtue – who grew up in the Los Angeles suburb of Rowland Heights – figured he’d end up “as a software engineer somewhere.” But UC San Diego recognized his outstanding abilities early on, offering him to stay on as a full-time program analyst in its bioengineering department.

“My boss at the time had left to go to Qualcomm,” Virtue said. “When I told him about the job offer, he said, ‘No, you’ve got to come over here. They are the smartest people I’ve ever met.’”

Virtue said he had never heard of Qualcomm, “but I really looked up to this guy, so I figured I might as well apply.” That was 26 years ago.

Back then, there were no chief information security officers and companies didn’t have big cyber teams. But Virtue, anticipating the market, began tailoring his skillset to the burgeoning need for cybersecurity and switched over from IT as soon as he felt ready.

Different Drumbeat

Something that even many of Virtue’s employees don’t know about him is that, before attending college, he played drums in a ‘90s alt-rock band. Called Pear, they were regulars on L.A.’s Whisky a Go Go and Roxy circuit.

“You wouldn’t recognize photos of me from then,” Virtue said. “We didn’t hit it big, and so everyone went off to actually have a real career.”

There is a parallel to be drawn between Virtue’s two seemingly disparate paths, and it’s in the position he chose to occupy in both. Virtue is most comfortable being the one keeping time in the back seat, not the one facing the customers and doing the inventing and the showmanship up front.

If his old bandmates flubbed a guitar riff or forgot a song lyric, they could always laugh it off and the song continued. But if Virtue’s beat stopped, the concert crashed to a dead, mortifying halt.

“I like that analogy,” Virtue said. “I’m going to have to use it.”

Keeping the beat for Qualcomm in the background is also what led to what Virtue cites as the greatest challenge of his career — a humbling but, ultimately deserved, rebuke from the head of a business unit team launching a new Qualcomm service while Virtue still served, rebuke from the head of a business unit team launching a new Qualcomm service while Virtue still worked in IT.

“He had some critical feedback for us,” Virtue recalled, “and it really gave me a new perspective for sitting in the seat of one of our executives who’s leading the business and dealing with customers. The teams on the back end will always get to go on to work on the next project. But, at the end of the day, if a service doesn’t work, it’s the business people who are going to feel the pain.”

That customer-first perspective. Virtue explained, is something that he’s carried with him ever since.

“It’s especially important on the cyber front,” Virtue explained. “Our goal is to protect the company, not to shut it down. It’s easy to be super cyber secure. I can just unplug the internet and we could just not go online. And we’d be perfectly safe. But that’s not really going to help anybody.”
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Innovator of the Year Award – Private Sector

DRATA

Company's Game-Changing Technology Streamlines Compliance

By COREY LEVITAN

Drata has received the Cybersecurity Innovator of the Year Award – Private Sector during the Cybersecurity Stewardship Awards 2023.

The software solutions provider, founded in San Diego in 2020, develops security and compliance automation platforms that monitor and collect evidence of company security controls.

“We are honored to be recognized,” said Drata co-founder and CEO Adam Markowitz. “We are a small, yet mighty army of dedicated tech professionals that are spreading cybersecurity awareness to the San Diego tech ecosystem. We love spotlighting the accomplishments from our community and are proud to be winners alongside other incredible companies.”

The San Diego Business Journal’s panel of judges has recognized Drata for reimagining how companies approach, understand and maintain their compliance. Its innovation is to automate and democratize access to it, making compliance more accessible, efficient and proactive.

Drata has streamlined compliance for more than 3,500 companies across 50 countries, automating compliance for more than 17 frameworks – including SOC 2, ISO 27001, PCI DSS and GDPR.

The judges especially admired Drata for serving as the trusted layer between modern companies – many of which face an uphill battle gaining the trust of their customers – and those they do business with.

Compliance is historically known to be complicated, costly and time-intensive, creating a disparity among companies that can afford to achieve and maintain it. But Drata’s automated approach helps companies around the globe achieve, maintain and transparently demonstrate their compliance posture in a simple, cost-effective manner.

Through Drata’s continuous control monitoring and integrations with more than 85 applications and systems, organizations get real-time, comprehensive visibility into their compliance posture. This is a real game changer for teams facing more complex requirements, changes in compliance frameworks and organizational evolution.

Innovator of the Year Award – Public Sector

NAVWAR

Navy Command Provides Outreach and Insight on Cyber Issues

By COREY LEVITAN

As the U.S. Navy’s technical lead for cybersecurity and one of the region’s largest cyber employers, NAVWAR (Naval Information Warfare Systems Command) has received the 2023 Cybersecurity Innovator of the Year Award, for the Public/Academia sector, to recognize its many innovative contributions to San Diego’s cybersecurity.

“We know that innovation never rests,” said NAVWAR Executive Director John Pope. “Today’s accelerated rate of change challenges us to push the envelope of innovation to keep pace with cyber trends – such as automated threat management, cloud security and zero-trust architecture – to ensure a stronger cyber posture and the future success of our naval forces.”

“We are honored to receive this award among so many impactful players in our regional cyber ecosystem.”

Among its many innovative achievements since NAVWAR won the 2022 Cybersecurity Award for Workforce Development Initiative of the Year, the organization provided technical insight and counsel to the San Diego Cyber Center of Excellence (CCOE) and the City of San Diego in launching the city’s first cyber lab in December 2022.

The San Diego Regional Cyber Lab (SDRCL) – winner of this year’s award for Cybersecurity Awareness in the Public/Academia sector – now provides the greater San Diego region with coordinated cybersecurity through collaborative access to tools, intelligence and training. And NAVWAR continues to provide its subject matter experts to help expand SDRCL’s knowledge and awareness, maintaining the region’s cyber resilience.

NAVWAR is also a part of CCOE’s Defense Advisory Group, which strives to better understand and address the evolving needs of the Department of Defense and the region’s defense industrial base. In addition, NAVWAR Command Information Security Officer Mark Compton guested on the “Cyber Insiders” podcast, discussing lessons learned and cybersecurity best practices, and provided insight as a panelist at the Navy’s Gold Coast Small Business Procurement Event in July.

NAVWAR is also heavily involved in local science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) outreach to increase the knowledge and interest in STEM careers, including cybersecurity, for K-12 students as well as college students.

Innovator of the Year Award – Nonprofit

WOMEN IN CYBERSECURITY SAN DIEGO AFFILIATE

Group Seeks to Boost Representation

By COREY LEVITAN

The San Diego affiliate of Women in Cybersecurity (WiCyS) has received the Cybersecurity Innovator of the Year Award, for the Private Sector, in the Cybersecurity Stewardship Awards 2023.

“It’s a thrill and a wonderful honor to have our efforts recognized,” said WiCyS Director of Programs Veronica Rauch. “We are a small, yet mighty army of dedicated women committed to advancing the presence of women in cybersecurity, a field which is still dominated by men today. It really means so much to us that the work we are so passionate about, also resonates with others.”

Founded in 2013, WiCyS provides a central place for women in cybersecurity from academia, research and industry to share knowledge, experience, networking and mentoring. The nonprofit’s San Diego affiliate, founded in 2020, has been at the helm of several local innovations that are spreading cybersecurity awareness to the San Diego community and beyond.

WiCyS San Diego hosts quarterly and annual local social, networking and professional cybersecurity educational events introducing and educating San Diego’s communities in online safety and cybersecurity awareness. Its inaugural Cyber Career Day, held last year at Palomar College, introduced attendees to various cybersecurity careers, and provided resume review/assistance, mock interviews, and professional headshots - all at no cost to attendees.

The nonprofit also distributes a monthly community newsletter highlighting training, grant and scholarship opportunities, upcoming cyber events and cybersecurity news and communications.

Rauch added: “We wish to thank the San Diego Business Journal, the Cyber Center for Excellence and our fellow cyber defenders and supporters who are doing their part to diversify the workforce and ensuring that under-represented persons have equal opportunities to succeed as cybersecurity professionals.”

By the way, male allies who support the organization’s mission are fully welcome and encouraged to be part of the WiCyS community.

“We invite all others to join us in the good fight against the ever-persistent cyber threats we face today,” Rauch said. “If our work can make a difference, then so can yours.”
Powers Career Journeys

Career explorations to cybersecurity begin with Journeys Map. We build tools that help people explore, plan, and succeed in their quest for meaningful work.

Thank you CCOE and SDBJ for the recognition, we are grateful!

Your career journey begins here journeysmap.com

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Awards 2023. The judges have honored the public research Autism Research (NFAR), as well as our employer partners, its interim president and CEO. “We owe our success for the private sector. The 2023 award based on the same workforce initiative. San– win- and Cyber Security and Intelligence Club Haiku San Diego” program is one of the reasons the non-profit has won the 2023 Cybersecurity Stewardship Award in the same category, it’s the second year for the partnership Haiku formed with its student-run Cyber Security and Intelligence Club. “World of Haiku” is a role-playing game that immerses users in a virtual environment promoting the development of essential cybersecurity skills. “World of Haiku” makes cybersecurity training far more accessible and attainable, eliminating traditional barriers to this specialized field. Since last year, Haiku has continued to innovate cybersecurity training by introducing a tool that allows anyone to build their own game-based training. Haiku Forge fosters cybersecurity awareness and fortifies regional resiliency by enabling businesses, educational institutions and citizens to build and engage with realistic cybersecurity challenges. The platform’s user-friendly interface allows individuals with varying levels of expertise to engage in skill-building exercises. “Many businesses use Haiku Forge to tailor training for IT teams,” Basu said. “Haiku Forge’s ability to create customized, real-world cybersecurity challenges not only enhances the skills of those in the field but also promotes a wider understanding and adoption of cybersecurity best practices. Its contribution to education, business empowerment, citizen engagement and regional resilience makes it a vital tool in the ongoing effort to build a safer digital environment.”

Workforce Development Initiative of the Year Award – Private Sector

HAIKU
Role-Playing Game Builds Essential Skills

By COREY LEVITAN

The winner of the Workforce Development Initiative of the Year Award – Private Sector, for the second year running, is Haiku Inc. The company has carved out a niche for itself by educating students about cybersecurity through games that use a learner’s skills to both locate jobs requiring those skills and to present those skills in the form of a resume for teachers or employers.

“Thank you, SDBJ,” said Haiku Founder and CEO Eric Basu. “With over 40K customers now, we’ve honored and humbled by this recognition from both the SDBJ and our customer base.”

This is not only Haiku’s second consecutive Cybersecurity Stewardship Award in the same category, it’s the second 2023 award based on the same workforce initiative. San Diego State University (SDSU) won this year’s Workforce Development Initiative of the Year Award – Public Sector, for the partnership Haiku formed with its student-run Cyber Security and Intelligence Club.

“World of Haiku” is a role-playing game that immerses users in a virtual environment promoting the development of essential cybersecurity skills. “World of Haiku” makes cybersecurity training far more accessible and attainable, eliminating traditional barriers to this specialized field. Since last year, Haiku has continued to innovate cybersecurity training by introducing a tool that allows anyone to build their own game-based training. Haiku Forge fosters cybersecurity awareness and fortifies regional resiliency by enabling businesses, educational institutions and citizens to build and engage with realistic cybersecurity challenges. The platform’s user-friendly interface allows individuals with varying levels of expertise to engage in skill-building exercises.

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Workforce Development Initiative of the Year Award – Academia

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY
Partnership Teaches 21st Century Cyber Skills

By COREY LEVITAN

San Diego State University (SDSU) received the Cybersecurity Workforce Development Initiative of the Year Award – Public during the Cybersecurity Stewardship Awards 2023. The judges have honored the public research school, founded in 1897, for the innovative workforce development partnership formed between its student-run Cyber Security and Intelligence Club and Haiku – winner of the same Cybersecurity Stewardship Award this year for the private sector.

“SDSU is humbled to be honored by SDBJ,” said Jerry Sheehan, SDSU’s Vice President for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer, adding that SDSU partnered with Haiku “to bring their software development expertise in teaching cybersecurity skills to the university, which allowed us to stand on their shoulders and leverage their investment to benefit our students.”

The central tool of the SDSU/Haiku partnership is a role-playing game. “World of Haiku,” that immerses students in a virtual environment promoting the development of essential cybersecurity skills. After only 90 minutes of game play, initial assessments can reveal improvements in students’ understanding of cybersecurity.

“World of Haiku” also makes cybersecurity training far more accessible and attainable, eliminating traditional barriers to this specialized field. This fulfills SDSU’s primary goal of promoting diversity within the cybersecurity industry. To that end, and through its partnership, “World of Haiku” deliberately focuses on advancing underrepresented students and cultivating a more gender-diverse workforce.

This unique initiative also functions as a workforce feeder program for SDSU students interested in launching their IT security careers. Students involved in the program may also have internship opportunities within the university’s Information Technology Division.

SDSU students who complete the game earn badges qualifying them for the SDSU Security Fellowship. This fellowship helps equip students with marketable technical skills that make them highly attractive to future employers seeking to place a qualified workforce into the high-demand, high-paying cybersecurity careers of today and tomorrow.

Workforce Development Initiative of the Year Award – Nonprofit

SAN DIEGO WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIP
Program Breaks Barriers to Entry Faced by Job Seekers

By COREY LEVITAN

The San Diego Workforce Partnership (SDWP)’s “CyberHire San Diego” program is one of the reasons the nonprofit has won the 2023 Cybersecurity Stewardship Award for Workforce Development in the Nonprofit category.

“The San Diego Workforce Partnership is honored to receive the Cybersecurity Stewardship Award,” said Tony Young, its interim president and CEO. “We owe our success to our valued partners, including the Cyber Center of Excellence, the Regional Economic Development Corporation, educational providers such as San Diego City College, MiraCosta College, San Diego College of Continuing Education, National University and the National Foundation for Autism Research (NFAR), as well as our employer partners and our dedicated staff members who have worked tirelessly on this initiative — Alistair Penny, Adrienne Chuck, Alyssa Abellar, Yadira Ocon and Rosie Alba.”

Established in 1974, the SDWP joins forces with legislators, employers and other nonprofits to empower job-seekers – especially those from systematically marginalized communities – to meet the current and future workforce needs of San Diego County employers.

SDWP’s CyberHire workforce program builds accessible pathways for underrepresented job seekers to enter cybersecurity. It connects employers, government, economic development associations, training providers and job seekers to address critical talent gaps in IT and cybersecurity industries by effectively training in-demand skills and reducing employers’ recruitment costs.

Since its inception, CyberHire has served 194 underrepresented participants – 31% of whom are women, 71% of whom don’t possess a bachelor’s degree, and 81% of whom are eligible for CalFresh benefits. The program collaborates with NFAR and recently supported the placement of a neurodiverse job seeker in an IT support position.

In the past year, CyberHire focused on removing upskilling barriers by covering the costs of certifications and offering test preparation support to participants. As a result, 61 participants have successfully passed 117 CyberHire-covered certification exams since the program’s inception, significantly enhancing their employability.
HELP SAN DIEGO LEAD THE CYBER CHARGE

Cyber Center of Excellence (CCOE) is a non-profit that mobilizes businesses, academia and government to grow the regional cyber economy and create a more secure digital community for all.

CCOE is thrilled to launch our Member Marketplace – a new member benefit that aims to create greater regional resiliency AND support the economic growth of a robust industry that supplies 26,000 jobs and invests $4 billion into San Diego’s economy. We have membership levels and benefits to serve all businesses, check out our website to learn more!

Lisa Easterly, CCOE President & CEO

Get involved at sdccoe.org.
Cybersecurity Awareness Initiative of the Year Award – Private Sector

JOURNEYS MAP
Firm Provides Direction to Cyber Job Seekers

By COREY LEVITAN

The 2023 Cybersecurity Stewardship Awareness Award winner in the Private Company category, Journeys Map, is a San Diego-based company dedicated to closing the widening gap between the cybersecurity industry’s increasing need for specialized personnel and the growing shortage of talent around the world who can fulfill that need.

This is the company’s second straight win in this category.

“Journeys Map is beyond grateful for the honor of recognition of our efforts to help address a regional and national shortfall in cybersecurity talent,” said CEO Peter Stibely. “Our team is passionate about transforming the way students, pre-professionals and job seekers successfully navigate career pathways in cybersecurity.”

Journeys Map by Edgate is a unique technology that leverages tech to guide and boost cybersecurity jobseekers. Its patented taxonomy generates a GPS-like “coordinate” that can be used as a starting point for every user’s journey. Once a cybersecurity career is chosen, the user’s coordinate is mapped against the career’s required skills, and a “route” is created between where a user is now and where they wish to be. Machine-learning and AI help to more rapidly align user profiles with the many CTE standards and required skills.

Journeys Map works with organizations such as CCOE, CASCADe, NAVWAr, NICE, and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo to attract individuals from diverse backgrounds to explore careers in cybersecurity.

Recently, the company was awarded the contract to build a recruitment solution for the U.S. Department of Defense’s ManTech Program, which has more than a dozen high tech manufacturing, robotics and cyber training centers throughout the U.S. Journeys Map is working with training experts at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to build this solution over the next year. It will be used by high school students, by military transitioning to civilian careers, and by individuals looking for a change.

Journeys Map is also being used by schools for career mapping, by institutions such as the San Diego Cyber Center of Excellence (CCOE), and by state programs to help all citizens find careers available in their regions.

Cybersecurity Awareness Initiative of the Year Award – Public Sector

SAN DIEGO REGIONAL CYBER LAB
City Office Offers Know-How to Small Businesses, Other Agencies

By COREY LEVITAN

The San Diego Regional Cyber Lab (SDRCL) received the Cybersecurity Awareness Initiative of the Year Award for the Public Sector and Academia during the Cybersecurity Stewardship Awards 2023.

The SDRCL was launched by the City of San Diego last year to help local agencies, small businesses and educational institutions prevent and protect against cyberattacks.

Its members – cybersecurity experts, academics, local CEOs and public officials – work together to enhance cybersecurity resilience through the timely sharing of information and analysis, and by providing specialized training with safe environments to simulate and defend against cyberattacks.

“I am grateful for the San Diego Business Journal’s acknowledgment of the Cyber Lab’s hard work over the past year,” said Jan Brazill, SDRCL lead and Program Manager for IT Operations Management and Compliance with the city. “In the past year, we’ve met with hundreds of representatives from local public, private and nonprofit organizations to discuss regional security strategies, the role of AI in modern cybersecurity efforts, and more.”

Business Initiatives

SDRCL was recognized for providing no-cost cybersecurity software licenses to regional public agencies, allowing them to spend more of their limited funds in other areas that may be under-resourced.

Coming up in the next couple of months, it will also make available a prototype cyber maturity evaluation tool through a partnership with Cal Poly and Amazon. The AI-based “My E-CISO” will allow agencies to conduct a mature conversation with a Large Language AI model. The model will evaluate the current cyber maturity of their organization against established cyber frameworks such as NIST.

Once the user’s conversation with this AI model is complete, a comprehensive report is generated, allowing users to relay critical information and priorities back to their management/executive teams for informed strategic decisions related to their cyber maturity.

“We can’t wait to share more details with everyone,” Brazill said.

Cybersecurity Awareness Initiative of the Year Award – Nonprofit

SDCCU
Credit Union Excels at Educating Consumers

By COREY LEVITAN

The San Diego County Credit Union (SDCCU) has received the Cybersecurity Awareness Initiative of the Year Award, for the nonprofit sector, as recognition for the number of free programs it offers to help keep San Diegans aware of, and safe from, nefarious only activity.

“SDCCU is proud to be named among the winners of this year’s Cybersecurity Stewardship Awards,” said SDCCU President and CEO Teresa Campbell. “SDCCU is committed to educating the community on how to protect themselves against cybercriminals who are actively targeting them and their finances in our increasingly virtual world. It is essential to be informed and vigilant about online security, and SDCCU is pleased to supply resources to aid in safeguarding the public.”

SDCCU creates a series of financial health marketing campaigns that align with relevant topics from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s monthly calendar. (November is International Fraud Awareness Week, for example.) These campaigns include complementary webinars, as well as regular blogs, social media posts, press releases, and emails alerting the public of current scams and other information relevant to protecting their financial health.

SDCCU also partners with local experts to provide free educational webinars. Each February, for instance, former San Diego County Deputy District Attorney Paul Greenwood presents a webinar about romance scams and how to stay safe while dating online. Each April and October, cybersecurity expert Jim Stickley educates the public on the latest tactics hackers use including ransomware and the dark web. And in June, for World Elder Abuse Month, San Diego County’s current Deputy District Attorney presents a webinar discussing common cyber scams targeting the elder population.

SDCCU also partners with the Identity Theft Resource Center to offer presentations examining the wide range of cyber and identity crimes occurring today, including social media takeovers and Google voice scams.