

Podcast Transcript

Risk Never Sleeps

Episode 64

Valarian Couch

Ed Gaudet: Welcome to the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast, in which we learn about the people that are on the front lines, delivering and protecting patient care. I'm Ed Gaudet, the host of our program, and today, I am pleased to be joined by Valarian Couch, the Director of Information Security Operations for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Let's start with a little bit about you, your background, your role. So, tell us about your role at the Planned Parenthood and a little bit about the organization.

Valarian Couch: The work of operations. I'm basically over everything with the security operations center with the SOC. So we protect their internal, then handle a lot of the affiliate data as well.

Ed Gaudet: Okay, great. So you're the protector. You're actually watching the screens and all the vulnerabilities and incidents coming in.

Valarian Couch: Yes. We do have three women that manage those teams.

Ed Gaudet: Awesome, awesome. How big is the team?

Valarian Couch: Yeah, we have a sizable team across the organization.

Ed Gaudet: Okay, good. And then, what type of tools do you use with the SOC?

Valarian Couch: Basic tool kit. Give it to them. Most of the details are there, but we do use a lot of basic security tools. But just for confidential reasons, we don't get into.

Ed Gaudet: Okay, sure. That makes a lot of sense. So tell me how you got into healthcare, in particular in cyber.

Valarian Couch: Healthcare. Actually, thriving in cyber a while ago. And my background started off in network engineering, and I went from network engineer to security at cyber. I started with nonprofits and manufacturing before came to healthcare. So, I was the CFO for a school district, and then I moved to the healthcare industry. And it's been an eye opener with the amount of threats and the landscape that goes on across the board. So it's just. Dealing with the day-to-day between what was going on in educational space that helped that space is similar across the board, actually.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, but it sounds like the volume is different. Yes. Yeah. Excellent, excellent. And what's from your perspective, what's different coming into healthcare that you noticed maybe from other organizations that you've been at?

Valarian Couch: I think that the it's not even really the level of grit. It's different. The level of threat is really the same. And honestly, I'd be there being able to be on the front side, being better, protecting the security systems. They still, before they happen, they kind of you have to be an advocate for this to be in this, to say, okay, well, I know this is my job. This is what I'm going to do. 24 over seven being able to check this organization, being able to keep a check, tracking data, patient information, that stuff as well. And it gives you a sense of sort of being able to do that, but also from the educational space. It gives you that sense of protecting kids' data and protecting teachers' data. So it kind of emerges that some of this at different parts.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, I love that. And that shared mission that you saw on the educational side certainly translates into healthcare.

Valarian Couch: Correct.

Ed Gaudet: Everyone's been everyone's probably been to school at some point in their life, and we're all patients at some point in our life, or we know patients or have loved ones that are patients. I love that connection of the shared mission. I haven't heard that in the past. That's really great. As you think about your you're exiting 2023, we're coming into a new year. What are the things you're looking at? What are your top couple of priorities over the next year?

Valarian Couch: It's a big year, really. When you got election going on, you got different things going on. So we have to tighten security everywhere. And not just from the healthcare space, from the automotive space. The education space says we have to tighten security across the board because most of the most times, a lot of things happen around election years, and you have a sense of security coming in that is not being seen, that you get more on those years because of election, because of the different things that are going on inside of those different spaces, especially if you're in education, healthcare, and some of your big name industries like is more is more out there that we can't see. So we're steady trying to detect the unknown. Deal with unknown; handle the unknown. While we're trying to make sure our systems that could remind us for those issues 1424.

Ed Gaudet: I think that's a great point. And I think it's often overlooked with an election. I'm sure the bad guys are leveraging that as people are distracted or focusing on the election to increase their attacks. That notion of staying vigilant and more disciplined is very important. Right? That's a really good point. Any other priorities you want to share? How about from a team perspective or from your own personal perspective?

Valarian Couch: I think from a team perspective, I seem to cultivate my team, kind of get them more around training, learning more. We have a great synergy with my team, and that's what any team that I kind of step into; we want to make sure that we all always have a synergy to where we feed off of each other. We kind of know where the weaknesses lie, where the strengths lie, and who could do what, and we just pick up from there. I think training is a big part in this industry. As you continue training to learn the ongoing threats, learn the ongoing. Surrounding, uh, the environment that you place yourself in is a big notion of how we're able to protect the driver. Are we able to protect those organizations?

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. I checked out your LinkedIn profile, and I love the point that you made about your passion about building a culture of accountability and collaboration. And that makes a lot of sense in what you just said there. I think it's important for all teams to have that perspective. As you think about the last couple of years with the pandemic and obviously going into the election, I imagine there's a lot of things that keep you up at night. Anything specific you would like to share?

Valarian Couch: A lot. So, during the pandemic, I was actually at the school district. Man, L.A., Hurry up with all the kids. Go virtual. Okay, now the kids come back. We had to change things and make sure everybody. Playbooks teacher has access to the digital I. Hills is crazy, and lives is going into up after the pandemic. Kind of gave me a little bit of a slower pace. But he was there. It was. It was a lie. It was a lie.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. And didn't you have to structure the classrooms in a way to maintain that?

Valarian Couch: We have to structure online classrooms. There's only online going. Even when they came back to school, we still had an in-person presence, and we had a virtual presence as well to make sure that we have had that collaboration between the two, with the teachers, making sure that their equipment was always working to make his school equipped. Yes. To think that was at home while teacher was teaching in the classroom. It was different.

Ed Gaudet: Did you go remote for a period of time, or were you pretty much in the classroom for?

Valarian Couch: The teachers went remote for a period of time, and we shouldn't be, so that they were there about a year and a half, being gone came back. It was you might have some spots where a school got sick, Covid being remote, fiscal remote. It was back and forth since then.

Ed Gaudet: Oh jeez. Yeah, yeah. So that was a tough couple of years, I'm sure. What are you most proud of, either personally or professionally?

Valarian Couch: I think that professionally, being able to be efficient enough to make everything run, keep everything up, building the infrastructure where we can make virtually happen or can make things happen. Being able to provide the community, um, a virtual desktop environment to where they can learn different things, and then also coming to Planned Parenthood and bringing their knowledge there as well. And, uh, personally, I should be done with my doctorate this month. I'm trying to schedule when I defend my doctorate. Yes.

Ed Gaudet: That's awesome. Congratulations.

Valarian Couch: Thank you.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. What did you what's your thesis on?

Valarian Couch: Well, cybersecurity awareness.

Ed Gaudet: Ah, there you go. That's a great topic. Yeah. Well, excellent. Well, good luck with that. So, outside of healthcare and IT today, what are you most passionate about? What would you be doing if you weren't doing this job?

Valarian Couch: I love to write, so we're doing a lot of writing. I do poetry writing, I do.

Ed Gaudet: Did you say poetry?

Valarian Couch: Yeah

Ed Gaudet: I write poetry, too.

Valarian Couch: Yeah, it is. Most people don't realize assuming it sits with you is relaxing. It is because it's just like you describing things in a way that makes sense to you, and you understand, and it kind of just peace to you as well.

Ed Gaudet: That's right. You get it on the page. And once it's on the page, it's outside of the head. So you're right; it's very cathartic, and it's very soothing. It's a really good way to think about it.

Valarian Couch: Yes.

Ed Gaudet: And any favorite poets that you have or that you read.

Valarian Couch: But they are all still; I want to say I like the Eagles a lot as well.

Ed Gaudet: Langston Hughes, yeah, yeah.

Valarian Couch: I did read a good bit of my hands and stuff, but I love my Langston conveys a lot of stuff. Like there's a lot of new boys I don't know by name, but the way that they talk by like incorporating light into their poetry now it makes it where it's relatable to millennials or to the younger groups like your old school boys related like to over old structure the light. But now that boy that drill down into the database of what's going on in like Whitney that.

Ed Gaudet: That's right. And a lot of the old time poets tend to see it through the metaphor, and where a lot of the poets today obviously will still leverage metaphors, but they're much richer in the language I think of what you said of the contemporary, what's happening in the moment. And today there was a really good documentary. Over the weekend, I watched Nikki Giovanni. Do you know her? Do you ever read her poetry? She was an activist during the 60s and she wrote a lot about the civil rights struggle, obviously, and other things. But she's the documentary is excellent. I highly recommend it since you like poetry. Get a lot of people say that. So it's what I would be doing if I wasn't doing this job. So if you could go back in time and talk to your 20-year-old self, what would you tell your 20-year-old self?

Valarian Couch: Don't absorb the military.

Ed Gaudet: Are you? I didn't know that you were. What branch were you in?



Valarian Couch: I was in army.

Ed Gaudet: Me too. Thank you for your service. Thank you. Yeah. Where were you stationed? Oh, okay. And what did you do basic?

Valarian Couch: I be a basic at Fort Jackson. Fort Bragg. Bragg.

Ed Gaudet: Okay.

Valarian Couch: Benning.

Ed Gaudet: Oh, Benning. Okay. Yeah. Infantry then I was field artillery.

Valarian Couch: Uh, the better; it was the best thing in the world. I would change it. But I think being me now, in all the stuff that we have at our fingertips, I would say, okay, let me go back and say, hey, you have another option.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. No. That's good. I like that answer.

Valarian Couch: Um, but it molds you into the person that you become. So they both combine and shape yourself out of it. So, it kind of plays a big part in my work ethics as well.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. No, I similarly I needed the discipline at the time. So it's sort of in many ways it saved me. I think I would have taken up probably a different path that probably would ended up well. Well, that's good. Yeah, I did my basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and then I was at Fort Bragg, and then I went to Oklahoma, Fort Sill, for officer training for the field artillery.

Valarian Couch: So, yeah, you know, being stationed in the wrong order at the wrong.

Ed Gaudet: Oh, yeah. How many years, how many years?

Valarian Couch: I'd be for the order. I did a total of six, but I was able to pay the majority of it, but I did. Cool, I wrecked twice.

Ed Gaudet: Oh, geez. Oh, wow. Okay, so yeah, I got out just before that all started to happen and unfold. So, I've got to ask you this question because this is the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast. What's the riskiest thing you've ever done?

Valarian Couch: Life or?

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. Tell me in life. Don't tell me in the SOC.

Valarian Couch: Yeah. I think looking back, jumping out of planes would probably be the easiest thing.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. Airborne. Were you airborne?

Valarian Couch: Yeah.

Ed Gaudet: All right.

Valarian Couch: Yeah. I pay my bills or pay for their bills for the one like, right?

Ed Gaudet: Oh, yeah, I imagine. Yeah, yeah. Many trips to the VA after that.

Valarian Couch: Oh, yeah. Stayed there a week.

Ed Gaudet: Okay. Yeah. No. Jumping out of planes is risky. No doubt. Well.

Valarian Couch: I don't know at that point. We live for the thrill, so.



Ed Gaudet: Yeah, absolutely. I don't know if you get this question in advance, but I'm assuming if you're a poet, you probably like music as well. You were on a desert island, and you could only bring five CDs or records with you. What would they be?

Valarian Couch: CDs are worthless.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah,

Valarian Couch: Me. B.B. King?

Ed Gaudet: No. Nice. Yeah.

Valarian Couch: I would do. I would go gospel CB in there. I think Kirk Franklin got some clear there. I will actually do Garth Brooks CD.

Ed Gaudet: Garth Brooks okay.

Valarian Couch:: Yep. Yes. Yep yep.

Ed Gaudet: Gotta have your country.

Valarian Couch: Yeah. Go from around Belmont. I got a mixtape.

Ed Gaudet: Yep, yep.

Valarian Couch: I felt. But by then.

Ed Gaudet: Okay.

Valarian Couch: That's about it.

Ed Gaudet: No classic rock? No. R&b soul.

Valarian Couch: R&b. I hated my song and they got a couple of new orders. I think we got something that they. New blues artist that I really love, needs, I really hate needs.

Ed Gaudet: Me, too.

Valarian Couch: New Lori stuff. That is fine. But when you lift the blues, it reminds you of Georgia like two. So they're gonna. Yes. That.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, exactly. It's much more. Well it's it pulls at the heartstrings more than R&B. R&b is it's a sort of a lover's music, whereas soul is a lot of pain and soul. And that song.

Valarian Couch: Jackson was out there. That's real nice too.

Ed Gaudet: I'm a huge jazz fan. My my dad would put me to bed to jazz records when I was a kid, so I grew up on jazz bass.

Valarian Couch: Yeah, nice.

Ed Gaudet: Well, that's good. Those are good choices. All right. So any last advice to folks in maybe breaking into cyber, maybe coming out of the network engineering role?

Valarian Couch: Don't take what you learn and feel that it's comfortable to apply it to every day. Come in as open-minded as possible. So be able to learn what real world looks like, because what's in a book is not a real world. What's real-world could be eligible? It can. It can be minutes sometime. It can be fun sometime. But just be able to take have fun with it. Make it your own. Become open-minded.



Ed Gaudet: I love that what's in the book is not real world. Unless of course, it's poetry. Then probably closer to real. All right. Well, that's great. Any last-minute comments or thoughts for listeners?

Valarian Couch: No, sir.

Ed Gaudet: All right. Excellent. Very good. We're here with Valarian Couch from the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. This is Ed Gaudet from the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast. If you are on the front lines protecting patient safety and delivering patient care, remember to stay vigilant because risk never sleeps.



Censinet RiskOps™ Demo Request

Do you want to revolutionize the way your healthcare organization manages third-party and enterprise risk while also saving time, money, and increasing data security? It's time for RiskOps.

SCHEDULE DEMO

www.Censinet.com