Carnivorous dinosaurs. Massive great white sharks. Venomous snakes. Snarling panthers. These are a few of the beasts I was enthralled by when I was a child in the late 1980s. This was well before the internet was in every household beaming easily accessible knowledge to any curious young mind. So, I sought to satiate my thirst for learning about treacherous and deadly creatures from books. I have fond memories of myself as a boy, begging my mother to take me to the local library branch where I would plop right down on the floor between the literature stacks and get lost for hours reading and looking at pictures of the menacing giants of the animal kingdom. These are my earliest recollections of being captivated by monsters.

In 1990, when I was still in elementary school, an 11-year old girl named Heidi Lynn Seeman was kidnapped in my hometown. I remember being filled with dread watching the initial report on television. She was grabbed off the street in her own neighborhood while walking home from a friend’s house, something I did all the time. I followed Heidi’s story in the morning newspaper before leaving for school and on the evening news before going to bed, always asking my mom what had happened to that poor girl and hoping she’d be returned safely. But, no. A few weeks after her disappearance, volunteer search and rescue personnel found Heidi’s decomposing remains in a field. She had been raped, murdered, and crammed into a trash bag. To this day, the suspect has never been identified or captured. This tragedy unfolded when I was just 9-years old and it was then that I had the chilling realization that there was a predator more terrifying and lethal than anything I had studied in the library. Man was the ultimate beast, and my fascination with monsters would narrow to focus on the human variety from this point forward.

As years went on, I remained haunted by the fact that Heidi’s horrendous murder went unsolved and her killer never faced justice. This awakened in me a strong interest in criminal justice, suspect apprehension, and retribution for victims and their loved ones left behind. In the mid to late 1990s, as I made my way through middle school and high school, I discovered the burgeoning field of forensic science. The application of scientific analysis to evidence collected at crime scenes in order to identify and hunt down the monsters who would visit violence on innocents naturally appealed to me. Shows such as Forensic Files, The New Detectives, and American Justice became my television staples and I spent countless hours reading true crime novels and books about serial killers.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I, and the rest of the world, awoke to an entirely new echelon of evil. Every television set in America flashed images of massive fireballs billowing out of the World Trade Center Towers as hopelessly trapped victims jumped to oblivion. At that time, and for the next decade, I took part-time college coursework, but mostly worked long hours reaching for the next rung on the occupational ladder. I found professional success managing retail and service-industry businesses before I eventually set out to build my own company in 2009. I became a federally licensed firearms dealer in Austin, Texas and had a modest warehouse and storefront where I sold guns, tactical gear, and ammunition. Through my work, I met plenty of police officers, state troopers, military personnel, and criminal investigators who would often speak about their career experiences. One day in 2014, after five years of hearing many electrifying cases my clientele had worked on, I had an epiphany – I looked forward more to the excitement of learning about their jobs than doing my own. As you can imagine, the fiery passions of my youth to study the wicked and catch those who preyed on others had never fully extinguished.

A majority of people would argue that if you find yourself unhappy in Austin, Texas then the problem is most likely you and not the city. After all, Austin wears the crown of “Live Music Capital of the World,” and rightfully so – on any given night of the week there are dozens of concerts spanning all genres from avant-garde to jazz-fusion to zydeco (and everything in between). The capital of Texas is also notable for its ridiculously good eats, copious varieties of ever-flowing craft beer, lush city parks, and abundant nature trails. Well, call me crazy, but I had had enough of hearing everyone boast about their weekends spent lounging at the Greenbelt, roasting in the Texas sun to sweat out their alcohol and greasy food intake. It just wasn’t fun anymore, and I was ready to pursue something greater. After 15 years of the monotony and mundanity of Austin’s “slacker” lifestyle, I applied to, and was accepted into, George Mason University’s Forensic Science Program. I was nervous, but excited, that I had finally resolved to make a change in my life.

My saying that I was going “*make a change*” was actually quite an understatement. In fact, this new direction I had chosen required several *major* changes and that reality really hit home during my last week in Austin. In my final seven days in town, I moved everything I owned into storage, sold my car, and packed nothing more than two bags of clothes to take with me. I had lived in Texas for over 30 years, been working in retail sales and the service industry for almost 20 years, and I hadn’t flown on an airplane in nearly ten years – yet there I was, newly unemployed and about to board a one-way flight to my new home, Washington DC. As the flight attendant hurried through her pre-flight soliloquy on emergency exits and such, it became clearer than ever, life was about to get much more interesting!

When I moved from my state’s capital to our nation’s capital, I was champing at the bit to learn from experienced professionals, and the renowned personnel in George Mason University’s Forensic Science Department did not disappoint. I had an introductory course in the subject taught by Joseph DiZinno, the former Director of the Laboratory Division at the FBI, and a man I recognized from an episode of Forensic Files I had seen years before. I was beyond thrilled! To me, this felt like the equivalent of a theater student being tutored by Sir Ian McKellen himself. Even though I was in my early 30s, I looked forward to attending my college classes now more than I ever had right after high school.

On my commutes to the George Mason campus in Fairfax, VA, I would pass the Pentagon and be reminded of the most depraved mass murder event in history – those hijacked planes hitting their targets over 15 years ago. I had only ever seen images of the 9/11 attacks on television, but now I was driving by one of the scenes of the crime on a daily basis… It felt unreal. One morning, as I drove to school, I realized I could make out the newer, whiter blocks of stone used to recreate the western side of the Pentagon after it was demolished by American Airlines Flight 77. Freshly quarried slabs of rock may have been able to put a shine on a rebuilt wall, but nothing in this world could replace the innocent lives that were destroyed that day in September. The weight of that fact is never lost on me.

In order to further broaden my education, I switched my degree path to a Bachelor of Science in Criminology, Law, and Society with a double Minor in Forensic Science and Intelligence Analysis. As the semesters sped along, my days were filled with intriguing courses in Counterintelligence, Homeland Security, and Terrorism – all taught by former members of the intelligence community who tied their career experiences to the material being presented in class. My mind began swirling with new possibilities and my excitement went into overdrive. I had moved here to earn a forensic science degree and enter the workforce with a police or sheriff’s department to help stalk and capture predators, but had I been thinking too small? My professors’ stories and my morning drives past the Pentagon reminded me on a daily basis that there was an enemy larger than those I had previously focused on. I knew I wanted to take an active role in hunting monsters, but now I want to be a part of taking on the world’s worst. Upon graduation, I aim to combine knowledge gained from George Mason with my business experience leading projects and solving problems to aid in the fight against terrorism.

The United States has a unique and powerful position in the world and I believe it is our collective burden to work tirelessly to maintain that position. Though it is an immense responsibility, my goal is to take part in that challenge and I intend to shoulder my share of the weight by contributing to the fight of preserving national security. With a deep passion for the application of science to crime, I wonder if enough of the principles of forensic science are being used by organizations of the intelligence community. Through research, I would like to determine if key opportunities exist for relating forensic science practices to the mission of combating terrorists and their appalling attacks on humanity.