

Kyle Shevlin: Hey, Everyone, and welcome to a new episode of Second Career Devs. I'm your host, Kyle Shevlin. Second Career Devs shares the stories of people who have changed their lives by changing their careers to software engineering or web development. As I like to say, it's about the road less traveled, and the lessons learned along the way.

Kyle Shevlin: This episode, I'm joined by Jerome Hardaway, who went from the Air Force to web development's "Captain America" and founder of Veterans Who Code. Now before we get into the episode, a quick word from our sponsor, Infinite Red.

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Infinite Red: Make sure to mention you heard about them from Second Career Devs. While you're reaching out to them, you should also check out Chain React, the React Native conference hosted by Infinite Red, right here in my hometown of Portland, Oregon, in July. Let me tell you, there's no better time of year to come to this fine city, and you'll be hard-pressed to find a better reason to do so. Over 500 developers from all over the world come to this conference to give and listen to the best React Native talks out there.

Infinite Red: Yours truly had the fortune of leading a panel last year, and this conference was incredibly well run, and enjoyed by all I met. Check it out, at Infinite.Red/ChainReactConf. That's Infinite.Red/ChainReactConf. Now, back to the episode.

Kyle Shevlin: Hey, Jerome.

Jerome Hardaway: Hey, how you doing, man?

Kyle Shevlin: I'm doing well. I'm so glad that we finally had a chance to get you on the show. This episode's been like, a year in the making. I know that's all on me, but I'm still very excited to talk with you, and share your story with the Second Career Devs audience.

Jerome Hardaway: Roger. I'm excited as well. It's something that I've been looking forward to. Something that ... I haven't podcasted in a long time, so it's definitely something

that, so much has changed. I've grown so much from my last podcast, so I was really excited to take this on.

Kyle Shevlin: That's awesome. Well, I'm glad to give you a chance to share how you've grown. Why don't we start by introducing yourself to the audience, and tell us what you do now, and what you did before?

Jerome Hardaway: Roger that. My name is Jerome Hardaway. I am, by day, a front-end developer for Populture and comicbook.com. By night, I am Geek-At-Arms at Vets Who Code. Prior to this, I was US Air Force, and I was Security Forces, United States Air Force. So, basically to put it in a ... IL security/military police and doing deployments; things of that nature. So I wasn't one of these guys, there was no like a fancy office all the time, and I wasn't "chair force" Air Force; I was in the dirt, Air Force.

Kyle Shevlin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). "Chair force" Air Force. I hadn't heard that, just because I'm not in that circle, but I do not think that's how I would think about most military personnel.

Jerome Hardaway: Well, the Air Force has ... every military industry ... if you're in the military, every branch has its own stigmas, and what our brothers at arms call the Air Force is "chair force", because they're like "Oh, you guys don't have to do any tough work," and it comes from a joke from the Air Force being the first service to have quality of life baked into it. We're the first and only service that actually has that already baked into its SOPs, its operating procedures, things of that nature.

Jerome Hardaway: So, because of that, people started calling the Air Force, "chair force", where basically we do the exact same thing that the other guys do; it's just that our bases are nicer. We go to Iraq, we get shot at, we go to mortars, we have mortar attacks, things of that nature; it's just that ... guess what? There's a pool at our base in our Iraq, versus you go to a Marine camp, and they're lucky if they're in connexes.

Jerome Hardaway: So, that's that whole ... it's a running joke that we have, so I always make sure that I say, "Yeah, I'm not "chair force" Air Force, I'm like ... I actually serve-"

Kyle Shevlin: You're on the ground. You're doing stuff-

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah. I was outside the wire doing stuff with joint teams in the Army and the Marines.

Kyle Shevlin: Gotcha. Why don't you walk me back? What inspired you, or motivated you to join the military? When did you do it? What were you doing exactly?

Jerome Hardaway: Sure. I joined the military in 2004. I was motivated simply because I just wanted more, and the people around me just weren't doing that, and I have military

family, so even though they weren't where I wanted to be after I left the military, I knew that I wanted to accomplish a lot more. No one in my family was Air Force, so I decided that I was going to go that route, and join the Air Force, and see what happens. I was initially going to go to college, but I opted out of going to college because ... I can do that while in the military, and I can also help somebody, make some real world experience also, and see some crazy cool things.

Jerome Hardaway: So, Security Forces, my primary missions that I did ... a lot of stuff in Pak-Afghan and in the AOR, the Iraq-Afghanistan area; so I was either a part of the Pacific Air Force command, or I was in training command, or a tactical command, or mobility command, and I did a lot of things of a ... I did some things as a Phoenix Raven doing flying missions, overt missions, and protecting planes and assets while in the Air Force. I did a lot of things in lieu ... like as just plain security forces doing things on bases. I actually worked at a prison in Iraq. I did all types of crazy things while inside the military.

Kyle Shevlin: That's interesting. That is a whole lot of experience you just can't get any other way. An experience that people don't really understand, probably.

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah. It forces you to grow up fast. I tell people my first time away from home, from my parents, I was in the military, and I was in South Korea on this remote base for a year, so while you're in college and when things are hard, you can go back home to your parents, something like that. I didn't have that option, and I'm 18, and 40-50 miles away from us is a ... entire country of people that wouldn't mind hurting us. So, when you're 18 and you come to that type of realization, like, "Yo, I'm an adult, adult; not just an adult. This is crazy."

Kyle Shevlin: This is real life.

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah. Yeah. You grown, grown now. Like "Oh. Okay."

Kyle Shevlin: That's interesting. Yeah, I mean, I can't imagine ... 18? I was 18, like I was going to a community college, living in the same town I grew up in. I couldn't imagine being in South Korea near the DMZ and stuff like that. That would be challenging.

Kyle Shevlin: You have family that was in the military. Did they give you any shit for choosing a different branch than they did?

Jerome Hardaway: Of course. That's a part of the rivalry, though. I have Marine uncles, I have Army uncles, I have a uncle that was in the Navy, I have aunts that were in the Army, so I think of everybody in the military that I have one aunt and myself that went Air Force, and we get the spoiled brat treatment, because I was like ... you know, the Air Force is like the youngest child of a family, where basically, Mom and Dad made all their mistakes on Army and Marines, and they got a little better with Navy, but the Air Force was last; they did everything right. They gave

... you're watching the Air Force stay out til midnight, and you had to fight for an extra 30 minutes on your curfew, right? So, that's how it's pretty much viewed, when it comes-

Jerome Hardaway: There's a lot more of ... the Air Force is a lot more of a thinking man's military terminology, versus the other services, but that's just because the government, by the time the Air Force was created, the Navy was already there, the Army was already there. There was the Marines component of the Navy; they were already there. And 1940 rolls around ... war came around, and they took the Army Air Force and made it the Air Force. They had over 150 years of mistakes to learn from already, so-

Kyle Shevlin: Oh. That makes sense.

Jerome Hardaway: So that's why ... I guess why it could be viewed as simpler or easier type deal.

Kyle Shevlin: I gotcha. Its like prototyping on an app. By the time you make the fourth version, it's so much better than the first version, and stuff like that.

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah. It's like iteration. I tell people, like when I was first building VWC, I viewed every aspect of that app. I don't know every aspect of the app now because the students do so much more work on it than I. But there was a point a year ago, where I knew every nook and cranny of that app, until we switched over to Gatsby.

Kyle Shevlin: That makes sense.

Jerome Hardaway: ... then I was like, "I have no idea what's going on."

Kyle Shevlin: I'm gonna do some abbreviation expansion for the audience. Jerome just mentioned VWC, and that stands for Vets Who Code, and we're definitely going to get into that during this episode. It's an amazing organization that I really want my Second Career Devs audience to know about and help out, but let's work our way up to the time you did Vets Who Code.

Kyle Shevlin: So, you joined the military in 2004. I'm not certain how long you were in there, but what-

Jerome Hardaway: I was in six years, got out 2010.

Kyle Shevlin: 2010, you get out. What started to make your journey from being in the Air Force to being a software engineer?

Jerome Hardaway: A couple of things. First thing's first; I guess the most ... in the military, you're taught to do research. I think that's like big. People think they're just people who ... particularly those who enlisted, they just follow orders. Well, no, we have to get ... you do research. It's called ... in military we call it intelligence,

where you're ... you don't just go into any firefight or any situation blind. You wanna know how to get ... at minimum, how to get into the situation, and how to get out of the situation if you don't need to be there anymore.

Jerome Hardaway: So when I first ... I believed the hype of like, being a veteran, and everything like, everybody else is being, from the recruiters, and stuff ... that everything was gonna be okay. When I get out the military, I had no idea what the Great Recession was. That's the thing about being in the military, and being so unslated, which I think it's the biggest advantage between guardsmen and people in the reserves versus people who are active duty; because people who are active duty, they're just in their active duty military bubble. What's on the base, is life; versus those who are in the guard reserve, and they're in a situation where yes, when they're active, that's life and that's important, but they also have this option to look at the world from a more expansive view cause they go back home and they're dealing with civilians and things of that nature all the time, so they're able to see what's going on the civilian side.

Jerome Hardaway: I [inaudible 00:13:13] ... I have that opportunity. So I get out, this thing called Recession, and suddenly without this uniform on, I've gone from a "thank you for your service" super-hero-type, to I am not even worthy of having a call back on my resume, or-

Kyle Shevlin: That had to suck.

Jerome Hardaway: Oh, yeah. It sucked. It's the most demoralizing thing you can think of, where you're suddenly not good enough for ... you're not good enough for the very people who you swore to protect.

Kyle Shevlin: And there's no respect built in ... I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but military being very hierarchical, there's just respect kind of, built into that, and people maybe aren't giving you the respect that you grew somewhat accustomed to. Maybe that's the wrong word, but what ... is that kind of right? What happened?

Jerome Hardaway: That's close. There are some things, like the idea of, for instance, in the military, one of the things I have to teach my troops to ... in the military it's, "Do work. Do good work, and we put it on your enlisted performance report, and we'll be able to sell that, so you'll be able to get better opportunities." So that's what you're focusing on.

Jerome Hardaway: In the civilian side, you learn really fast that ... that does not fly. What matters is "Do work. Do good work," but also, "Build relationships. Build as many high-level relationships as you can," and-

Kyle Shevlin: Right. Network.

Jerome Hardaway: ... yeah, network. In the military, there's no such thing as networking. We actually have rules where you can't even ... you can't fraternize. We have rules like "Two up, Two Down" so, that's an unspoken rule. You can't date anybody that's two ranks up, or two ranks down. Two ranks up and two ranks down is the max you can date, and if it's past one tier, you can just forget about it. The best thing, like you're a staff sergeant, you can probably date ... your an E5, you can probably date an E4, or you can date an E6, but don't even think about going towards an E2. Like, just don't do it. And you can date anyone who ... if you're enlisted, you can't touch anyone who's an officer, you can't network with those people. So we have these archaic rules that separate people on this tier structure in the military.

Jerome Hardaway: That doesn't exist in the civilian sector. You can have the lowest guy in the civilian sector on the totem pole at your job be cool with the CEO over the fact that they both are big football fans, or they went to the same college, or they're ju-jitsu fans, or-

Kyle Shevlin: Sure.

Jerome Hardaway: ... they like going to the range. These are things that are commonalities and you can build on so people could see another side of you, so that way they can like you while doing things, and that ... that's not in the military. So that was the first thing ... that's really the first thing I try to teach my people, is that's ... get that out of your head. I know exactly you feel because I was right there as well, and some of them take it easier than others.

Jerome Hardaway: I had one guy who's a rockstar now, but that was the hardest part for him, was realizing that ... actually you helped him build the relationships he needed to get the job that he has; but initially when Andrew ... his first story, that was the one thing he was vehemently against, like networking, building relationships on Twitter, doing talks and stuff. He absolutely hated that, and the hilarious thing about it is, the minute he did it, he reached out to you, and sent a tweet out, and then he end up getting a job because of it. And it was so funny, and I was like, "So, you literally just had been holding yourself back because you didn't want to do this thing."

Kyle Shevlin: That's funny.

Jerome Hardaway: Just imagine if you had did this sooner, if you had not been so against this, because "it's not like how we do things in the military". It was very funny, cause it's very hard sometimes, for them to see things from my point of view, because I'm the guy that gets all the awards; I'm the guy that gets all the accolades; so to them it's like, they weren't around when VWC was just starting and when I was just starting, so they don't see the struggle and the hard work.

Jerome Hardaway: They see the ease. They see how guys and girls who they only dream of talking to, will add me on Twitter and talk to me, or like this year, for Veteran's Day

surprise, we got Wes Bos to come in and talk about [crosstalk 00:18:02], and they were sitting there like, "Yo, how the hell did you do this?" Well, it's like, no, pause. I'm not some easy, breezy, Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory dude; it took five years of programming, working as a programmer, and building jobs to be able to speak intelligently and have a body of work that these people respected, so that way they were able to talk to me.

Kyle Shevlin: That makes sense.

Jerome Hardaway: They'd be willing to talk to me and give me those chances.

Jerome Hardaway: But they don't see that. They only see the, being invited to the White House, and Facebook-type stuff now. So, that's how that works.

Kyle Shevlin: That makes sense to me. There's so much good advice in there, I'm just gonna try and sum it up really quick, cause, I mean the main advice seems to be, networking doesn't have to be a dirty thing ... this thing to be afraid of. It's very useful. The story you alluded to ... I helped out one of Jerome's students, Andrew, land a job and it was really awesome to be able to help him in that way, and then it sounds like ... you work with veterans so, if they come out having maybe this idea, of: If you follow these steps, you get to these places, and then you get to the world, and the steps are not quite amorphous. The steps can be ambiguous; not easy to understand.

Jerome Hardaway: You said it yourself best. It's the wild, wild west. We are accustomed to a more hierarchical standpoint; a more structured standpoint when it comes to that total person concept in community. That's not the case in the civilian sector; in the civilian sector it's wild, wild west . It's friends and connections, and building relationships, and going higher and higher, and bigger and bigger, each time. So that's what you kind of have to do. That's what I try to teach them. It's a different ballgame out here, but don't be scared of it; be ... like for me, it's the most exciting thing, because I honestly, I hate hierarchy and leadership on trials and stuff, like I understand the importance of it; I just hate it cause it's one of those things that, it just never really made sense to me.

Jerome Hardaway: I come from a small town; I come from Richmond City in Memphis, it has a ... well, we like to call it a "good 'ol boy" system, in which this certain type of individual needs to give the write off and be successful, and when I learned how to program, I really kept my chops in programming when I was invited on a scholarship to come up to New York for four months. New York has a totally different thought process, where they move fast, and they break things, and you don't have to have to, as I like to say, "kiss the ring" where if you're from a Southern state, you kind of get that. Southern people, they want to play the game ... it's not what you can do, it's who you know and who knows you, and who's willing to vouch for you-

Kyle Shevlin: There's a whole different power dynamic.

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah, it's a very antebellum ... there are still some things that they have not evolved out of upstream from down here. So, it's like, that is one thing that has really helped me, and it's very funny because to this day ... it has its consequences. To this day, I just got into a real big blow up about this. The people in my hometown, while they're tech community, they were like "Oh, you're egotistical. You wanted to be the star." I was like "I didn't want to be the star, I just went to where people actually were listening to me."

Kyle Shevlin: Sure. Sure.

Jerome Hardaway: I could either ... people don't like ... that's the beauty of the internet and how small this world is now because of it. Why spend the energy ... I could spend four or five months in my hometown building those relationships, or if you get invited to go speak at Facebook, or go meet Barack Obama, you go take that shot. You know, I tell people all the time, which one do you think I'm going to do? You think I'm going to go to your meetup, or go meet the 44th President of the United States? Ask yourself who's more important, and who can help me reach my goals the fastest. What looks better on my resume?

Kyle Shevlin: It's that Southern saying of "You're fixing to get above your raisin", right? And-

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah.

Kyle Shevlin: People try and ... I went to college in the South, so I only got to see it. I didn't personally experience it, cause I don't have family from the south and none of that, but man, I'd see these things where essentially, there's all these power dynamics and power structures in place, and it's an interesting thing.

Kyle Shevlin: I'm glad you were able to get out to New York, and learn to code. Let's talk about that. How'd yo go from ... you come back home into the Great Recession that you didn't know really was going on. You're trying to figure out what to do. What got you to start programming, and got you to New York, and all that stuff?

Jerome Hardaway: Simple, easiest thing is research, like I said. First thing I looked at was ... alright, recession? I researched recessions, and I researched recession-proof jobs, and I looked at the biggest places that had the biggest L's that weren't really L's, were like, tech.

Jerome Hardaway: Like in the nineties it was the internet bust, or these dudes, "the internet just crashed", and all the stocks and stuff's going down, but I was like ... Elon Musk, he was going from like a multi-millionaire to a millionaire. Bill Gates was losing money, "Oh, he's worth only 3.2 million dollars now." I was like, you know what? I would love to be "only" worth 3.2 million dollars, so this is the direction I'm gonna go. I don't know anything about this, but there is a place in here I wanna fit in. So, like I know there's a spot here that I wanna fit in.

Jerome Hardaway: So, I had a book that I just ... somebody let me have a pad that was in the barracks about databases, and I was going over through that book and learning things through that book, and I ended up getting my first job as a database analyst with the TWIC program in the Department of Homeland Security as my first civilian job.

Jerome Hardaway: So that was like my first thing of tech ... going through these databases, checking them twice, basically making sure that people who wanted access to the United States waterways ... I working with the Department of Homeland Security and Coast Guard and STHMS, and all of these other programs, and going ... basically joining tables to people's backgrounds to see if they were felons, or they could be terrorists, anything of that nature, they had anything that would not allow them, or would consider that to be safe if they were on the waterways of the United States. Like they essentially keeping terrorists off the city river. That was pretty cool, and that was my first taste of tech, sitting behind a computer and going through databases, and looking up people's names and things, and checking to basically see if they were good people or bad people.

Jerome Hardaway: After that, someone in my family ended up getting sick, so I had to go home to help them, and I was trying to figure out what I was going to do at home. Well, I didn't have relationships, in any of this, so there was no one to vouch for the things I had did, and I would get interviews, and they would want to hear more about the things I did in the military, and less about how I could be an asset to their company.

Jerome Hardaway: I'll never forget, one day, I was sitting there, I had an hour-long interview, and they asked me all these questions, all these stories, and then they didn't even bother to call me. They sent me a letter letting me know that I wasn't selected, and I was like, I just wasted an hour of my life, and asked me all these crazy questions that had nothing to do with job, and you didn't even have the decency to call me and ask me how'd I do ... or feedback; anything like that, which is I think the most demoralizing thing.

Jerome Hardaway: If you are a hiring manager, and you're hiring veterans, don't ask the veterans about what are the things they've done in the military without ... if you're not thinking of them as an actual applicant. Every veteran deserves the respect of you wanting to know them and get to know their story, if you're actually considering hiring them. But if you're not even thinking about it, don't ask them about what they did, and don't thank someone for their service if you're like ... if you want veteran for their service, give them a shot. That's what you should do. Don't "Thank you for your service, but you're not qualified here, because you don't ...", you haven't really given them a chance. You're looking at a piece of paper, and you're not taking a shot on hard skills and soft skills, and as a veteran that's gone through it, it's the most disrespectful thing you can do. It's like you're wasting my time where I could be doing something more effective that can help me be better; help me make money; help me prep for that next job, versus what you're choosing to do, which is waste my time.

Kyle Shevlin: I think a lot of people feel that, I mean, maybe not ... I don't think people experience it the same way you did, and perhaps the veterans you support now do, but I think a lot of people feel that frustration in interviews in general, where they go through a long process to be summarily rejected, maybe for something that was obvious, or maybe you went through a whole process and they weren't really considering you. That really sucks that you went through that, and I think it sucks that people would try and-

Jerome Hardaway: I ... back then, it sucked. But see that comes without the whole story, right? I have seen all these things and different tactics and different moves, so now I know how to navigate them. I know how to pass those down to veterans that need more help, so that way they can navigate that, and I think that's what makes it so ... that's what makes the journey so awesome, and what makes us different. There's no cookie-cutter way; I have real-world tactics on how to get your foot in the door and how to build relationships, and high-level relationships, things of that nature, and there's a total different ... I'm leading from the front, because I've done it and I'm currently doing it. I'm not somebody that has no need to do it, right?

Jerome Hardaway: So in the end that helped me because it helped me be able to coach my ... being able to coach my veterans, and give them the courage, like let them know that they are worth things. I think there is nothing more encouraging than somebody telling you "Hey, oh no, don't take that. You're worth more than that. That person doesn't want to give you you're worth, then you don't have to deal with that." There's nothing more empowering than to have someone else tell you that, and you're not having to do the self-speak, and someone else, telling ... you having to tell yourself that in the mirror or something. You have to have your own self-confidence. Somebody literally looks at you and say, "You are worth more than that. Forget those people. Screw that guy." You don't have to do that at all.

Kyle Shevlin: Nice. They get an advocate for them, and someone who has experience and can tell them that.

Kyle Shevlin: So let's get into that. How did you go from ... you're a database analyst; you eventually like ... you struggle but you get new jobs, and that kind of thing. How did you start this whole "Vets Who Code" organization? What was the inspiration? That moment you realized you need to make this?

Jerome Hardaway: Sure. It's very funny, because I tell people all the time ... the biggest lesson that I tell people from me being me, is listen to your subordinates, or your subordinates will become your competition.

Jerome Hardaway: When I was ... I was still doing very ... I was at a nonprofit job as the marketing; I was handling all of the marketing, but I was doing mostly web dev work. I had done three iterations of the website, I had taught myself how to use WordPress, how to use HTML, CSS, and PHP ... enough PHP to learn how to hate PHP, in this

job. The thing that catalyzed that is that I had raised the online revenue ... this is a nonprofit; you can't use Google ads and things of that nature, right? So you have to use upsells and things of that nature to get people to donate.

Jerome Hardaway: I had raised the online revenue using social media and the web presence up to 200%. It went from they were getting no money from there to the fact that they were getting double the money of any kind donations month-to-month that they were getting from ... person to person, right? You know what I'm saying? I'm saying any kind of donations from normal people. It wasn't compared to organizations or foundations, things of that nature that give out big checks. This was like, the average everyday Joe. The data had showed over the course of the year, my work; they were getting double the amount they were doing in person cash, month-to-month, when it came to online.

Jerome Hardaway: So, I come in and I just wanted my boss, at the time, to put me up for Top 20 Under 30, and I'll never forget, he asked me "Do you feel like you deserve it?", and I had all this evidence ready, and stuff like that, and I told him and expressed that, and he said "Hm. Okay." And that's it. I never heard about it again. That's it.

Jerome Hardaway: A year later in a meeting, we were talking about ideas of how to become more self-sufficient, and I was talking about training and education, and things of that nature, and I had literally brought up Vets Who Code; I would have brought up teaching veterans how to code, and had already got money from Thomas and Betts for a computer lab for the nonprofit; so I had already that not only was my idea viable, but I had the potential to raise money on my own. I'm talking like, "Oh, they gave us \$9000 for this." Everybody looked at me like I was ... like for a lack of better words, like I was smoking dope, like I was high as a kite. All these, basically, old white dudes were looking at me like "You got to be insane. Why would we teach veterans how to make computer programs."

Jerome Hardaway: They, in their head ... because maybe two or three of them were enlisted, maybe half of them ... like we in a room maybe twenty guys, maybe half of them were veterans, most of them were officers, and they come from ... like I said, they're all over 50, so: a) Everything I'm saying is over their head, b) We are in a transportation sector so they not looking at the long game like I'm looking at the long game. I was like back in 2014-2015, looking at the game, it's like "Yo, Memphis is eventually gonna have to stop focusing on selling itself as a place for cheap labor, and start focusing on being a place for smart workers, because eventually, warehouses are gonna die; travel, transportation is getting easier when it comes to freight; it's getting more technological; we're gonna be replacing people with robots. I was thinking that in 2014-2015, and people were looking at me like I was not on my [inaudible 00:34:17] stuff, right?

Jerome Hardaway: So, I pitched them the idea of Vets Who Code, and I didn't hear a word about it afterwards. They tossed it out it out of the wind, even though I had raised the

money for it, and had proof of concept that you could train someone how to be, at minimal, tech literate.

Jerome Hardaway: I had a Vietnam veteran who had family long-distance, and he was sad and could not interact with his family because of the fact that they were so far away, and our owner was like "They don't really talk on the phone", I'm like, "Yeah, but are they on Facebook?" I literally spent like eight weeks with my own gear, my own time outside of work, teaching this Vietnam veteran how to use the internet, how to use email, how to use social media ... how to use all this stuff. You know, next thing you know, he's talking Google Hangout with his family, and he's video chatting stuff, and I hear stories even to this day about him, and how the dude's just tech literate. He's teaching other Vietnam veterans how to use technology more adequately so that way they can communicate with their loved ones.

Kyle Shevlin: That's awesome.

Jerome Hardaway: And that was my first big win, like yo, this can be done. This dude's 63 and can do it. I'm sure some post [inaudible 00:35:33] veterans can do this and get to the level where they can get jobs. They didn't see it that way. So, I started doing it on my own. I started focusing on getting better billing programs, getting better with my speaking of how to be able to ... I don't want to say dumb it down, but basically get it from a non-technical standpoint. I saw ... that was the thing that kind of clicked with the whole being in security forces, because like security forces guys kinda get picked on as being the infantry of the Air Force, and we have these very military basic lingo that everybody has to learn and do something in a firefight; any field, like they're doing squat formations, all this other stuff.

Jerome Hardaway: Anyway, I was able to apply that to what I learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, to teaching programming, because all these people, they understood what a fire team was. They understood the nomenclature of a weapon. They understood all this stuff, so I could apply these exact same lessons to how to teach programming. And I could do that, and made it agnostic to every branch, and that was the best part of it, because I took this path and made my teaching style and the things that I was using ... I also think the craziest thing I have is like we have a question on our website about MREs, and I learned that coasties don't eat MREs, so they're more spoiled than Air Force people.

Kyle Shevlin: Coasties? Coast Guard?

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah. Coast Guard. So, I was like "Oh, snap. Like, the Coast Guard doesn't have MREs? Where'd I'd get that at? Okay. Cool. Whatever." So I was able ... I had this vernacular that made it, basically made my education style agnostic, cause I come from a combat sports background when I was a kid, so I had this boxing background, and pretty much everybody understood boxing, especially the Navy and the Marine guys. I had this military, on-the-ground combat background, so I

could talk about these moves and these maneuvers and I could translate them to the idea of building a web app, and understanding that because I was ... also the decisions I had made, I didn't know were preparing me for this.

Jerome Hardaway: I just focused on getting my style right, and then I was always telling people how to learn how to code. If you want to be prepared for the next ten years, learn how to code, learn how to code; this was like 2014-2015. Well, no one was really listening to the kid that was, even though he was programming, they didn't know that because my title was in marketing. So I applied to General Assembly, and I got denied.

Kyle Shevlin: Damn.

Jerome Hardaway: Right? That's the thing that people kind of like to leave out the story, even General Assembly, when they talk about my successes and stuff, they never bring up the fact that they said no to me the first time. When I applied, they said no to me; but what happened was, there was a veteran in my community right during the time of the VA scandal, that ended up losing his life, and the VA being at fault for it but not taking responsibility. It was a crazy fiasco; it was horrible.

Kyle Shevlin: That sucks.

Jerome Hardaway: And the family ... like the most the VA would give the family enough for a headstone, and this family was not prepared to lose a 25 year old kid from that, and so I used tech and I literally built my nonprofit that day from the ground up, writing code, and was able to talk and tell the story, used relationships I built in media.

Jerome Hardaway: Because the thing about this was first and foremost, nobody ... cause VA said they weren't at fault, no one there received VA funding or at fault, so they weren't gonna touch it because the VA said no, and when this whole antebellum style, like hierarchical style, "Big brother said no. I'm not gonna touch it," right? I'm like, "Well, the VA ain't give me no paper, so, I can do what I want on my off time." So I took two days off work and I literally was building it out, and I was using my relationships; I had a GoFundMe account; I was doing all this stuff to build the relationships and using everything I learned; and in 27 hours, we had raised \$10,000.

Kyle Shevlin: Damn.

Jerome Hardaway: And we just ... we gave that money to this family. Bam. Done. Over.

Kyle Shevlin: That's cool.

Jerome Hardaway: That was my claim to fame, and it's very funny, I tell people all the time, like people ... I still tell people haters are gonna hate. People literally never, ever bring it up when they're saying something negative about me, about how I got

into the game, and I laugh about that, cause I was like, "No. They'll never tell you that I helped a ... that my first swing at bat, I helped a family, just gave 10Gs to a family after raising that money."

Kyle Shevlin: Yeah. You didn't just like, hit a grand slam. You like walk-off homered, owned the ballpark, and bought the full concession stand and shit for everybody. I don't know where I'm going with that metaphor but you really killed it on the first swing.

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah. I absolutely had. I dominated the first try, and no one ... like I tell my people, I was like "You have to be your own salesman, because people will not sell you, so you have to be your own salesman. You have to be your biggest cheerleader. It helps that I am your cheerleader, but don't just depend on me to do it."

Jerome Hardaway: So I did that, and lo and behold, the next week, guess who's calling? General Assembly. General Assembly's calling, saying that they miraculously, have found more than enough money for me to come up to New York and train at GA, as well as learn through mentors while in New York. So, what's the place? Purpose. Higher Purpose paid for my housing, another LinkedIn had ... Microsoft had paid for the class, but I had so much credit and so much clout about ... talking about using code and stuff, that GA came back to me. And that's why I tell people that, you know, don't take a no as an insult, because literally, the same people who are saying no to me are saying yes to me now. That's how the system works. That's how the game plays. If you keep ... if you do good work, and you're not shy to talk about your work, and if you're not afraid to go to bat for your work, then people will come to you.

Jerome Hardaway: So I'm in New York now, literally, I'm supposed to be in New York in November, but its September, so I am winding down getting ready to leave my job and stuff, but the whole time it's a very tenuous time because I am being treated as like, I'm in this ... I don't have any drama; I'm this new kid on the block; I'm [inaudible 00:42:51] to everybody even though I been engaged for two years just helping another nonprofit. So everybody's trying to figure me out.

Jerome Hardaway: My boss is furious with me, because basically I just went trending on Twitter and everything else, and I was the biggest thing for like a month, and I had eclipsed him, and he was mad because he like, "You couldn't say that ... you couldn't put us anywhere on that?", and I was like, "Y'all didn't do any of the work," and it's like, that's the idea; like that's where that whole antebellum style, like I was supposed to kiss the ring to not piss off the master, and I was like "but you didn't do the work though. I didn't even learn any of this stuff from you." Every skill that I used, every relationship that I had, I had developed on my own; the skills that I used, I had developed on my own, so why should you get any praise? Just to essentially, protect my spot at a \$10 an hour job? Nah. I'm good. If that's all I gotta risk, I'm fine with it. I've just shown you that I have that real-world talent.

Jerome Hardaway: So it was a very tenuous time, and so I decided that, no, I'm not gonna let this dude-

Kyle Shevlin: Hold you back.

Jerome Hardaway: ... know that. Yeah. No, I wasn't gonna let him know that I had got the scholarship. He wasn't in my network, I didn't have anybody at work in my network ... any of that. So I was like, I'm just gonna let the chips fall out and see what he does, as long as he thinks he has the upper hand. Of course, he ends up unceremoniously firing me and thinking that, "Hey, I'm gonna make sure that Jerome can't work in this industry here again." Doesn't know that I have a scholarship. He doesn't know til the day I'm on the plane. Somebody's like, "Oh, no, Jerome's already gone. Jerome's in New York." She said he was in shock that I was gone.

Jerome Hardaway: "What do you mean, he's gone?"

Jerome Hardaway: "Well, yeah, Jerome won some big scholarship. He's going to New York."

Jerome Hardaway: And she said his words were, "Well, that's not gonna lead to anything," and that was it. So-

Kyle Shevlin: Because Memphis is the ... Memphis is such a better city than New York to advance with-

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah, and it was very funny. I just, I laugh at that. I think about that all the time, that's why haters are gonna hate. Haters are haters.

Jerome Hardaway: So, I'm in New York. I'm learning everything I can. One of the brief things that I used to my advantage, that I saw with General Assembly, that I did not like them, was that there was too much time for fluff and I'm the type where a dedicated project. The best part that I had ... the advantage that I had is that I already had some experience; I already had a production of a project that I was able to sell, so my idea was getting better; my technical expertise and learning more. I chose to get better at Ruby at the time; I think that was something I should never did, but I did ... it worked out for me. I shoulda focused more and more on Javascript and front end and just stayed at that, cause I loved front end way more than I loved back end programming, but it worked out for me because I was able to have a job within six weeks of going to GA, back home in Memphis as a Ruby developer.

Kyle Shevlin: That's awesome.

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah. So, then I let these people know that I want to finish up this program first. So I was halfway through the program, a job offer, offer letter signed, sealed, so I got that thing off my shoulders, in which I'm not thinking about paper ... I'm

not thinking about how I'm gonna make a living when I get back home or what's my next steps-

Kyle Shevlin: Right. You had security.

Jerome Hardaway: So, all I focused on was getting better at Ruby than everyone else, and getting ... like building relationships. And that was one thing I did not like was General Assembly was, very much like "you're already a developer" field, and I was like "I am not already a developer until I press the button." You're not a developer until that first check clears. That may not work for everybody, but for me, it's like "I'm not a developer until that first offer letter is signed."

Kyle Shevlin: You're holding yourself to a higher standard, like.

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah.

Kyle Shevlin: Gotcha.

Jerome Hardaway: I tell people all the time, I don't need that. I don't need to be gassed up. I like running on E, like I steal that Drake line all the time. And that's my philosophy behind it. It's like no, I don't ... I want to earn it. Don't give me the accolades right now-

Kyle Shevlin: Gotcha. You want to earn your eat.

Jerome Hardaway: I wanna eat. Yeah. I'm like, I'm hungry right now. It's time to eat. I think I get that from boxing.

Kyle Shevlin: That's awesome. So, you land this job like, while in school. You get to focus on building up your skills and really developing who you are as a dev. You have all this security set aside, and I'm gonna guess that gave you a place where you could put all that extra energy you had into building up Vets Who Code. Am I right?

Jerome Hardaway: Yes, and no. I spent my time ... if I wasn't building, or learning more things about Ruby on Rails, particularly Ruby, learning ... like one thing for instance I learned like at my job is that Ruby ... trying to learn Ruby on Rails is a nightmare, because you have to learn Ruby; and then you have to learn Rails, and just because you're on Rails, does not mean ... just cause you know Ruby, does not mean you know Rails. Like, right?

Kyle Shevlin: I've been there.

Jerome Hardaway: So, especially, if somebody came from a different background, like the guy that was before me came from a Java background, and build it with a lot of Java idioms. So if you didn't know anything about any ... like Java anything, and you're going to a Rails app that is not designed and developed with Rails in

mind, but with the experience of a Java developer, it was a nightmare. So I learned a lot of things about code smells and just how to write ... never say bad; first I learned there's no such thing as bad code, there's just older idioms. I don't believe in bad code. I'm feeling like there's definitely bloated code, but there's no such thing as bad code. This code could have been hot shit ten years ago, or if it was ... like I said, if it was in Java, it would be the bomb, but this isn't Java; this is Ruby, this is done harder than it used to be done.

Jerome Hardaway: So, one month after that, when I was in New York, I had those six weeks. I focus on building and learning about more Ruby on Rails, and when I wasn't doing that, I was focusing more and more on learning how to ... what's the best way to say ... building relationships and network. One thing I felt, like I said, GA had too much, what I like to call, non-useful ... like useless down time built into the curriculum for me, at that time. When I say that, I mean like for instance we'd be meeting ... we'd have talks with companies that really, the people that were talking did not come from our backgrounds; they weren't in what we were doing or anything like that, so they weren't useful to point ... get in directions. That was the first thing, I was like, "I'm gonna nix that." There was too many fun things, like "Let's do trivia night", I was like "I'm not doing trivia night. I'm going to focus on my time doing something a little more useful."

Kyle Shevlin: How much do you think that attitude comes from the time you spent in the military?

Jerome Hardaway: 100%. There was a story where I was for three hours, I was the most ... one day in Iraq, after three hours, I was the most respected leader in the area. The story is about, we were getting ready to go home. We had this connex that we had to basically ... cause we were getting ready to go home, and everybody was on base, now getting ready to return to their bases. So, now we had these giant connexes. We had to empty out these connexes and separate them based upon the teams, and refill the other ... so that the vehicles could get filled with the right people's stuff, right?

Kyle Shevlin: Okay. Yeah.

Jerome Hardaway: ... so we could go home. Well, all of the E6's, they get in this meeting, and they're over there ... they're debating the best way to do this, and an hour goes by, and they're still debating the best way to do this. I'm an E4 at the time, so I'm like "Screw this. These dudes are over here playing 'Who's the smartest', 'Who's biggest in charge', this planning thing, but ain't nothing getting done.

Jerome Hardaway: So, me, I just jump on the connex, and I start taking stuff off, because I'm like, "At least I'll start taking stuff off, we're halfway there," right? At least its like that. Connex is full; like this is a giant connex. This is not little thing. Bout 10-15 minutes later, another senior airman jumps up, he's like "I'm following you, cause you're the only person's doing something." Thirty minutes later, a few other people jump up; an hour later, we have a whole team ... you know, we're

just passing all this gear to the side. 'Bout two hours later what has decided is people who could not, who were not strong enough to help with some of the bigger equipment, they're helping sort the equipment. So we have people that are sorting the equipment now. I didn't come up with that; I just started moving stuff. And you know, that's where the importance of like, do something, you know?

Kyle Shevlin: Yeah. Bias to action.

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah. Wes Bos has a sticker that I love, and I love it so much I'm almost thinking about getting a tattoo of it, called "Idle hands do nothing," right? And that was that lesson that I have, that's been ingrained in me from that ... from 2007; from that day, is like everybody ... all the people that were making more money than me were talking about the plan, but no one did anything. So, I'm sitting here, picking up things that's doing things and I'm becoming a leader through action.

Jerome Hardaway: And that's in my style. I am the first person that's gonna jump into the firefight, so you're gonna respect me cause you know that Jerome's the first person that's gonna jump in that. He has a practice of that. So that was a story of, for three, four hours ... now this whole thing is going on, and now the leadership is now, they're helping and they're getting involved; and they're the last ones involved because they thought it was gonna fail because I was just a E4 and they had two more stripes than me. So, now they're helping, and no ones saying a thing, but it was like, "Yo, this would've never happened if Sea Airman Hardaway had not initiated this contact first. So that's been my thing, like I don't like, [inaudible 00:53:36] active rest, let's say, I need a breather on something ... I believe in reading if my head is stuck. I believe in taking ... mix the fluid in me, read something, do something constructive with my time so that way I can get back into this. That has been my secret for everything.

Jerome Hardaway: That was my secret in New York. I was very useful. I use my time. If I was on lunches, I was emailing people, seeing if I could get lunches with them, for my lunch while other people, they were going out with their constituents, with our people and our cohorts. I was meeting with people at LinkedIn; I was meeting with people at Apple; I was meeting people at this place, building those relationships because, for me, that had higher value.

Kyle Shevlin: Right. It sounds to me like you are a person who always acts with a purpose, and I get the sense that's who you were, even before the military, but then the military-

Jerome Hardaway: Well, no. I don't think that. I mean, I had military family members, but I don't think I was the type of person that acted with a purpose as a teenager.

Kyle Shevlin: Okay.

Jerome Hardaway: I'm pretty sure ... I mean, was a teenager-

Kyle Shevlin: Sure.

Jerome Hardaway: So, like ... heaven forbid.

Kyle Shevlin: Maybe not always, but now it seems like an ingrained part of you.

Jerome Hardaway: Well, I ... have you ever read the book "Discipline Equals Freedom," by Jocko Willink?

Kyle Shevlin: No. I will add a link in the show notes on it, though.

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah. He also, if you don't want to read it, is on Spotify as a spoken word playlist as well. Jocko, in his prologue, he always talks about the why. Like the why we do it. He says even though he doesn't have to, he still pushes, cause he owes it to the people who can't do it. And that's how I look at it. I owe it.

Jerome Hardaway: I tell people all the time, forget what these ... forget what the haters are saying, you owe it to the people that can't do anymore and bawl out. Like you owe it to the people that lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan, to come home and live your best life. You're doing that treat yourself day, for them and you. You earned that. You're not doing it just for you. You're doing it for them, you're living it for everybody that isn't living anymore, and don't let anyone tell you anything differently. That's how I view it. I'm out here, grinding and doing the best I can so that way ... because you know, there's somebody out there who wishes they could do this, or could've been twice as good at this as me, and didn't make it from the AR. There's somebody who's in this position, or who could have been in this position, and could've been 15 times better than me, and didn't make it out of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Jerome Hardaway: So, I owe it to that person to do the best of my abilities. And that's how I view it. Like I owe it to the dudes ... I owe it. That's why I don't take pay from Vets Who Code. I owe it to those guys and girls that are in here to leave ... I owe it to the people that come after me to leave bread crumbs, because there is no one who knows more how it feels to say thank you look, for your service, but you're not qualified, than me.

Jerome Hardaway: I feel like ... I tell people all the time, while I feel like there's somebody out there than me for this position, I am still one of the best people for this, because I'm an African-American male, that enlisted veteran. I am the most marginalized of the marginalized of populations, and if I can make it, I can help anyone make it. I have game plans to make it whether you're LGBT, whether you're a woman, whether you're a straight white male, because I know how to come from the most marginalized of marginalized of people who ... I'm in a circle of, like my own mother didn't think I could do this. And that's what I tell people, like the truth, my Mom was like, "There's no way somebody's gonna pay a black guy to do tech, and to write code," and within a year, I started making more money than her, so that was cool.

Jerome Hardaway: That's my favorite part of the story. Yeah. Made more money than my Mom after a year, and she told me that she didn't think no one would pay for it. That is what I tell people. That's what makes me [inaudible 00:58:01] do it. I don't pretend to be some super smart focused guy. I'm working on this stuff all the time. I am forgetting stuff all the time. There are things that I don't necessarily agree with all the time, especially front end; the front end was ... When 2015 was around, people were still talking about [inaudible 00:58:19] , Angular One was the big dog on the street, and freaking people were cool using Bootstrap and Foundation. Its 2018, now going 2019, everybody needs their custom CSS, everybody's either using React, using Angular, thinking about Vue, or not using any framework or library at all.

Kyle Shevlin: Right.

Jerome Hardaway: They're focusing on making their code as performant as possible, so you not only ... then when it comes to like, you know, Javascript by itself you have to learn jQuery, Javascript, the newer Javascript and ES6 because you're gonna have to learn how to use Javascript to take apart jQuery and refactoring, write that in Javascript, and you can't use ES6 in the browser when you're doing things with the ad stack, which, if you're in a big company is a very important part of the job.

Jerome Hardaway: So you have to use that, so these are all things that I didn't even think of, these things weren't even fathomable when I was first learning how to code, and thinking about front end stuff. If you knew jQuery, you were safe like, four years ago, technically. So, that's where I can tell people, I feel like sometimes I feel like, "Oh, that? It's like I remember when jQuery was hot." So, they're like, "What? What is this? I don't know that that is."

Kyle Shevlin: That makes sense to me. There's lots of money wrapped up in companies in old tech. I tell people that they should take the time to at least familiarize themselves with it. I meet a lot of students who come out only learning the newest and greatest thing, and they don't realize, like, yes, you might get lucky and you might get a job that has this, but if you learn something a little older, like a little Ruby on Rails, how many APIs are still built on that; or a little jQuery, cause how many old websites will need to be refactored, or that kind of thing.

Jerome Hardaway: Yeah, that's the only reason I teach jQuery is for the refactoring process, so, yeah. And that's the advantage of being in the industry, in the field, right? I am not somebody coming from a high level overview; I'm Captain America first in the line, throwing my shield and fighting the baddies, then I'm coming back and reporting to you what I found.

Kyle Shevlin: Let's talk about that just a minute. Let's talk about Captain America a little bit, because you've kind of developed a persona, a nickname, a something. You've got an affinity for this Marvel character, am I right?

Jerome Hardaway: That's putting it mildly, like. I am when it comes to the tech community, most people call me Captain America. I think it boils down from I think the colors of Vets Who Code, my love of the character, I tell everybody that it was actually Avengers Civil War the comic book that made me love Captain America, and it kinda ... when I was in Iraq, it came out, I was just turning 21 in a place ... can't drink in a country that everybody wants to kill me. So it's like high school.

Jerome Hardaway: So this comic book comes out around that time, and I'm seeing this part with Captain America and Spider Man, the young Spider Man, Miles Morales ... I think his name is Miles, is getting some mentorship from Cap. And Miles was asking Cap, "What do you do?", and Cap is like, you know, "I'm gonna do the right thing, regardless if people support me; regardless of my home, like if everybody says to move in one direction, and it's the wrong direction, regardless of if my parents tell me, regardless if my loved ones tell me, regardless if people that are popular tell me, they tell me to move, I'm gonna ... it's my duty to put my feet into the ground and say, "No. You move."

Jerome Hardaway: That helped me find a purpose of sorts, and that helped build my ideas around Vets Who Code, and around tech and things of that nature, to where, just because everybody did that, don't mean I gotta do it that way.

Kyle Shevlin: Right. That makes sense.

Jerome Hardaway: Like especially if I'm seeing this easier, unexploited pathway. Like for instance with VWC, we don't take the normal, the typical capitalist approach when it comes to like apps and we don't even think of like free code camp or something that like that. We don't accept everybody and their freaking mother right? We go deeper where we focus on a higher quality education, and adding more things, and adding more ... while it's free, we add a lot more accountability.

Jerome Hardaway: You're accountable to your mentors; you're accountable to your instructor; you're accountable to your team; that's what we focus on, cause we teach you things out the gate that makes you a unit, like the first two weeks you will learn, we weren't even get, not just like get flow, because we expect you to work as a unit. So you having to learn how to build ... you gotta do sprints in combat and [inaudible 01:03:32] and pull features; things like that. So that's what we demand from our troops, right?

Kyle Shevlin: That makes sense. We're running a bit low on time. This is a long episode so far. So, I kinda wanna reign us in and just bring it to a bit of a close.

Jerome Hardaway: Cool.

Kyle Shevlin: You know, you've given so much wonderful advice today, Jerome. What little tidbit do you have for anyone out there; civilian or veteran or otherwise ... I'm not sure there is an otherwise, but you know what I'm sayin. What advice do you have for those people trying to make this career change?

Jerome Hardaway: Take action. I think the biggest thing is people just ... people always are trying to figure out what to do, but the thing is, they're so busy trying to figure out which is the right step to do, they're not focusing on doing something. Elon Musk is a billionaire, not because of the things that he does today; it's his ability to context switch and take things that he learned from one thing, and apply it to something else, and so doing something is gonna get you a lot further than doing nothing, right? And being able to take the lessons that you learned. Being able to take the lessons on how to create a function is like, whether you're doing it in C or Javascript, there are some things that are gonna ...there's gonna be cross-function in that, so like I said, my first thing is take action. Do something, you know? That's my biggest thing. Do something.

Kyle Shevlin: I like it. I like it a lot. Jerome, thank you so much for joining me today, sharing your story and all the nuances around it; sharing how Vets Who Code got started, and the work you're doing today to help veterans learn how to code and change their lives, you know, I love it. It's good stuff. Thank you so much for joining me.

Jerome Hardaway: Roger that, man. If you ever want a part two, hit me up and we'll start back from there.

Kyle Shevlin: Sounds good, and thank you for listening to another episode of Second Career Devs. If you like the episode, consider sharing it with your friends, writing a review, or both. If you haven't already, please subscribe to the podcast.

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