

LOCAL

Dan Kaminsky, S.F. native and pioneer of internet security, dies at 42

Sam Whiting

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Comments

Daniel Kaminsky at a computer convention in 2000.

Angie Roberts

Dan Kaminsky was an 11-year-old computer whiz working all night behind his bedroom door in St. Francis Wood when his mother, Trudy Maurer, got a phone call alerting her to what her son was up to.

The call came from the internet administrator of the Western U.S., warning her that someone in the house was “looking around in places where he should not be looking,” specifically military sites, and that he should stop under threat of seeing the family connection shut down.

Maurer responded with a threat of her own. She took out an ad in The Chronicle saying that “government security is so crappy, even an 11-year-old can break it.” They negotiated a three-day suspension of service, which drove Dan nuts. “He was infuriated that his rights were abrogated,” she said. “At 11 he knew the word abrogated.”

He also knew the word “cybersecurity,” and after that three-day suspension lifted, young Dan went on to prove that he could hack into any system, anywhere. He put that expertise to good use by becoming a preeminent expert in internet security. Kaminsky worked on contract for Microsoft, Google, Cisco and other big technology firms.

Kaminsky died April 23 at his home in San Francisco. The cause of death was diabetic ketoacidosis, said his aunt, Dr. Toby Maurer. He was 42.

“Most people in his profession are nerds,” his mother said, “but Dan was captain of his high school debate team and he could speak to people who knew nothing about cybersecurity in layman terms that they could understand.”

In a 2016 video on hacker history, Kaminsky said: “We made the internet less flammable. ... The internet was never designed to be secure. The internet was designed to move pictures of cats. ... We didn’t think you’d be moving trillions of dollars on this. What are we going to do? And here’s the answer: Some of us gotta go out and fix it.”

To do so, Kaminsky was perpetually on the road troubleshooting problems on computer networks all over the world. He’d return for a day or two and stay with his mother, then be gone again, sometimes with less than 24 hours’ notice. Though San Francisco was always his home, he never was here for long until the pandemic hit. Then he rented a house to wait it out.

“Dan was a pioneer of doing experimentation on security of the internet. He found major problems and led groups and teams to fix the problems that he found in this system,” said Jon Callis, director of technology projects with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a technology and civil liberties nonprofit in San Francisco.

“Without Dan, we would not have the confidence that we do today that the internet works correctly in bringing you to the site that you want to get to,” Callis said.

Daniel Michael Kaminsky was born Feb. 7, 1979, at Children’s Hospital on California Street. By age 2 he had taught himself to read in the bedroom, where he would later teach himself computer science. For his 4th birthday, Kaminsky got a Radio Shack TRS-80 personal computer. He was the only one in the family who knew how to use it.

When he was in preschool, his mom got a call from the teacher. “She said he was correcting her spelling, and it was very annoying to her.”

He attended Herbert Hoover Middle School before entering St. Ignatius College Prep, where he embraced the Jesuit philosophy, though his family is not religious.

“The moral compass and the ethics he was taught at S.I. made him value other people and not be a narcissist, which he could have been considering his talent,” Maurer said.

At St. Ignatius, he was required to do 100 hours of community service. He did his at Laguna Honda Hospital, reading books to victims of catastrophic injury or illness. When the hundred hours had been satisfied, he kept going, even after he graduated in 1998.

He probably could have gone to any college on a scholarship, but he applied only to Santa Clara University, to stay within the Jesuit system. He’d been working as an intern at Cisco in Santa Clara in high school, and he continued working there while in college. He finished his bachelor of science in commerce, with a major in operation and management information systems in 2002.

In 2008, he was consulting for tech companies when he found a problem in the Domain Name System protocol used on the internet, involving vulnerability in 160 million computers, said his mother, a retired chief executive for a medical company. He informed the Department of Homeland Security and companies including Microsoft and Cisco, then led a team to develop a patch to fix it.

While still under 30, he went to London, accompanied by his mother and his grandmother, Raia Maurer, and was presented with a lifetime security achievement award. One of the co-recipients noticed the fact that his grandmother was there and commented that Kaminsky was perhaps too young for a lifetime achievement.

His grandmother came to his defense. “Sometimes people like you and I have to wait until we are old to be recognized in the world, but not my grandson,” she said. Kaminsky also invited her to the Black Hat hacking conference in Las Vegas, where he gave a keynote address to an audience of 2,000.

Before the event, he put Grandma Maurer to work baking 300 of her specialty Swedish cookies. At the end of his speech, Maurer announced that anyone who

asked a provocative question would receive one of what he called “browser cookies.” But he was too congenial to be strict. Everybody who asked something got a cookie until they were all gone.

“We read a lot about tech geniuses who are troubled people,” Callis said. “But Dan was a genuinely nice guy. He was kind and would just do nice things for people.”

When the stay-at-home order hit in March 2020, Kaminsky went back to working in a bedroom, still solving security issues. But he was more than a sleuth. He helped get things built for friends.

“He loved helping with startups,” said his niece, Sarah Roberts. “When he saw there was a potential to improve anyone’s life in any capacity, he was there to help.”

Survivors include his mother, Trudy Maurer, and stepfather, Randal Howell, of San Francisco; grandmother, Raia Maurer, of San Francisco; father, Marshall Kaminsky, of Chicago; sister, Angie Roberts, of Sacramento; aunt, Toby Maurer, of San Francisco; niece, Sarah Roberts, of Eugene, Ore.; and nephew, Stone Roberts, of Sacramento.

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