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Cyber sleuths ace hack competition

By Eleanor La Prade

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DOVER — They stared intently at their laptops on Saturday afternoon: 35 handpicked cyber sleuths, seated at folding tables in the conference center at Delaware Technical Community College.

Today, we can check our bank accounts on our smart phones, download software to file our taxes or go shopping on the Internet.

But cyberspace is under attack. And the cyber sleuths Saturday were training to fight back.

“The good news is, we’re connected,” Elayne Starkey, the state’s Chief Information Security Officer. “The bad news is, we’re connected.”

According to the Identity Theft Resource Center, there were 619 known data breaches nationally in 2013.

Victims included colleges, government offices, health systems, insurance providers and businesses; late last year, hackers stole credit card information from Target for tens of millions of costumers.

To help combat the threats, Gov. Jack Markell launched Delaware Cyber Aces in September, an online cyber security education and training program.

The top participants were tapped to compete in the Governor’s Cyber Aces State Championship on Saturday.

“When we go online, we have to do that responsibly,” Ms. Starkey said Saturday.

“And we have to be very grateful for this training and for the people who are back at work, defending our networks from all of the bad stuff that’s going on out there.”

As attacks become more complex, the competition Saturday, she said, will prepare the next generation of professionals for the battlefield.

“It’s hard stuff. That’s why we’re so grateful for this type of opportunity. The very number one way to learn this is hands-on,” she said.

Participants were competing in an hours-long defense simulation, NetWars — the same program the U.S. Military uses to train its officers in network warfare.

The simulation benchmarks cybersecurity skills, from forensics to vulnerability assessment; it was developed by the SANS Institute, a private company that focuses on Internet security training. It works like a game of “Capture of the Flag.”

“It’s like trying to break into a



Submitted photo

Kevin Kaminski of Wilmington and Yingbo Wang of Newark took second and third place, respectively, in the Cyber Aces Tournament at Delaware Technical Community College on Saturday.

box,” said finalist Jeffrey White, who first became interested in Internet security while serving in the U.S. Navy.

“I think it’s going to inspire me personally to learn more,” he said.

“The industry has to constantly stay on top of it to stay on top of the bad guys.”

Saturday’s event was one of seven state championships organized by Cyber Aces, a nonprofit dedicated to discovering and developing talent for the Internet security industry.

Competitors Saturday included veterans and college students. Some were just starting out in their careers, while others were looking to change jobs. Delaware showed the highest per capita registration of any state, Ms. Starkey said.

The winner of the competition was Noah Andrews, a teen from Newark who is finishing up his senior year in high school.

“It was amazing,” he said at the end. “It was really, really fun.”

Noah, who’s home-schooled — and a self-admitted computer geek — said his journey started when he landed on a robotics team at 10 years old.

Now, he’s hoping to make a ca-

reer out of information security and plans to enroll at Delaware Tech in the fall.

Kevin Kaminski, from Wilmington, was the second runner-up. He recently graduated from University of Delaware with a computer science degree, but like Noah, he is mostly self-taught.

“A lot of people just learn on their own,” he said, “That’s the way to do it.”

“It’s really just up to you to set it up and have motivation to keep doing it.”

He learned about the competition through attending the state’s U.S. Cyber Challenge summer camp.

Afternoons like Saturday are “a lot of fun,” he said, but offer hands-on experience as well. The challenge forces users to think in different ways about commands and tools.

“You can learn a lot of stuff in a short amount of time,” he said.

After finding and filtering through talent, David Brown, the executive director of Cyber Aces, said that the last piece is connecting people with jobs.

In June, the organization will host a “virtual career fair,” when Cy-

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ber Aces participants can log on to post their credentials or live-chat with sponsors and employers.

Job-seekers can pick up a position drafting policies — like changing a password every 90 days — or even work in academics, teaching or writing research, Mr. Brown said.

But he especially hopes to fill jobs on the front lines of cyber defense.

“The place that there is a tremendous gap is in those who have technical cybersecurity skills,” he said.

“It’s not just, ‘Do you know the policy for changing the password?’ It’s, ‘Do you have the skills to go into a computer and find the bad guys?’ And the vast majority of people cannot.”

JP Morgan Chase was one of the sponsors of Saturday’s event. Daryl Graham, the vice president of global philanthropy, agreed that there are plenty of jobs available in Internet security — but it’s difficult to find people to fill them.

“We want people to understand that this is a sector of technology that is important, and this is an opportunity for us to help people get connected with people who do that,” he said.

“It’s about people who have a skill who are honing and developing that skill, and creating opportunities for them to have a career.”

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