

HARRISONBURG BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES

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Axon AI is a local technology company that deploys swarms of software processes on massively parallel computing architectures that continuously assess new information and learn from human input and real-world observations. *Translation* – they do some really cool, innovative work in the field of artificial intelligence.

I recently sat down with three relatively new employees of Axon AI to hear their perspective of working and living in Harrisonburg, and why, with the in-demand skills they have, did they choose Harrisonburg. Each of them has a different background and is in a different stage of life. Jordan Ballard is 32 years old and is married with three young sons. Emily Dick is 22 and Axon is her first full-time job out of college. Ramzoullah Niaz is 26 years old and previously worked in Northern Virginia for two years.



(left to right) Jordan Ballard, Emily Dick, Ramzoullah Niaz

Tell me about your academic and professional background.

Jordan: I grew up in Northern Virginia and I finished about a year and a half of junior college and then moved to San Diego before starting my own clothing brands with my brother and sister. I moved to Los Angeles in 2005 and had been there with my business ever since. I started with Axon AI last June (2016).

Emily: I grew up in Broadway and graduated from JMU last May. I started with Axon in December.

Ramzoullah: I grew up in Queens, New York and Harrisonburg. I graduated from JMU in 2013 and worked for an information technology firm in Northern Virginia for the past two years. I started with Axon last December.

What do you do at Axon AI (as much as possible in laymen terms)?

Jordan: I use popular JavaScript frameworks to build applications around our artificial intelligence, as well as business development and operations management for the company.

Emily: I am a software engineer. I test the user interface and assist senior software engineers where needed.

Ramzoullah: I'm also a software engineer. I help clients understand big data sets that can relate to anything from fraud detection to predictive analysis.

When did you move to Harrisonburg?

Jordan: I moved to Harrisonburg in June, 2016.

Emily: My family moved here in 1998 and I've never left.

Ramzoullah: My family originally moved here in 2001. I lived in Northern Virginia for two years and moved back to Harrisonburg last summer.

You each have highly in-demand skills. Why did you choose Axon AI?

Jordan: Given my experience owning a small business, I was seeking a company that was the right size and in the right stage of growth that could benefit from my business experience as well as my technical knowledge. Axon AI fit my level of comfort and allowed me to contribute on a lot of fronts. Also, artificial intelligence is an exciting field to be in right now, so that was very intriguing.

Emily: I really wanted to stay in the Shenandoah Valley. I majored in physics, but liked programming. I took some computer science classes and really liked them. Axon is working on cool and interesting new technology. I saw the job listing on the Shenandoah Valley Technology Council website and applied.

Ramzoullah: I wanted to be in the area first and foremost. I came across the job listing from a JMU email and applied. Another thing that interested me is Axon's work in artificial intelligence.



View of Courthouse Square from Axon AI's office

How much of a factor did living in Harrisonburg play in choosing to work at Axon AI?

Jordan: My wife grew up in Harrisonburg and her family is here. I grew up in Northern Virginia and my family is there. We knew we didn't want to be in Northern Virginia because it was too reminiscent of



the LA rat race we wanted to get away from, and we knew that if the right job opportunity presented itself in Harrisonburg that it would be a great place to live, work, and raise our three boys. So, the opportunity to work at Axon just fell right in line with our goals and really made the decision to live in Harrisonburg really easy.

Emily: After JMU I did consider leaving Harrisonburg. I applied to 10 jobs in Richmond and Northern Virginia, but I really, really wanted to be here. Every day when I was job searching I looked up Harrisonburg first. After I found out I had an interview at Axon though, I turned down other interviews in Richmond and Northern Virginia because I wanted to be in this area, and had faith once I got the interview that I could get the job.

Ramzoullah: When I moved to Northern Virginia, my family was always asking when I would move back. Coming from New York, well New York has a lot more to do than Harrisonburg obviously, but if you're looking for something more peaceful with still a lot of stuff to do, Harrisonburg is a great place.

What do you like to do in Harrisonburg?

Jordan: Life has moved really fast for me in the past year with moving and getting my family settled here. I love being outside in nature, which is one thing that is very attractive about Harrisonburg and the Shenandoah Valley. Our house is on a few acres in a forest and I'm outside as much as possible, chopping wood, doing yard-work, building trails and playing outside with my sons. As spring and summer approach, I'm looking forward to getting out hiking and camping and enjoying the mountains. My kids love being outside too and when our property isn't enough stimulation for them there are plenty of parks around the city that are well taken care of, never crowded, and not caged in like the parks in LA. There's plenty of space to let our boys run without worrying about them running into a street or out of sight.

Emily: I love hiking. I love Skyline Drive being so close. There are so many trails at Shenandoah National Park and other places in the Valley. Trails are everywhere and so many have great views. I love the street fairs where they close down Court Square and have hot dogs, fries, food like that and arts. Fourth of July and First Night are also a lot of fun. When I was at JMU, I would go to plays and concerts and it's nice to have that opportunity so close. It seems they (JMU) have something arts related every weekend.

Ramzoullah: During the winter, I stay in mostly. I haven't gone skiing yet at Massanutten. During spring and summer, I go to Shenandoah National Park and Sherando Lake. And I like to hike to Humpback Rock. Harrisonburg is surrounded by a lot of beautiful scenery. Also, Harrisonburg is close to a lot of places. If you want to go Northern Virginia it's only a two hour drive and easy to get to.

Tell me about your commute to work?

Jordan: It's amazing! Almost any time of day in LA you will battle traffic at some point along the way. I had to drive 14 miles to my office downtown and it would take 45 minutes to an hour, and God forbid there's an accident, Dodgers game, or a concert at the Hollywood Bowl happening...it can quickly turn into 1 ½ hours to go 14 miles. Driving almost anywhere felt like a grind and was often a point of stress. My commute now is nine miles long and takes 15 minutes door-to-door without fail. That includes parking and walking. Along the way it's just rolling hills around me, the big sky above me, and only five traffic lights ahead of me. I feel like I get the best of both worlds because I work in the heart of the city where I can walk to great restaurants and be around other professionals as well as college students, but then I get to retreat to my home/hideaway only 15 minutes away, but really it's a world away from an environment standpoint. I feel really lucky.



Emily: I'm in Broadway. I brag about my commute to friends who live elsewhere. You have rolling hills and trees. I pass a Food Lion on the way home, so it's easy to stop in quickly for milk or eggs or whatever. It's a great commute, superfast.

Ramzoullah: My commute now is definitely a lot better than it was in Northern Virginia. In Northern Virginia, I would walk 10 minutes to the train station. Sometimes the trains would take forever to get there to even get the commute going. All in all, it was about an hour commute to work. Now everything is easy. It takes me about four to five minutes to drive to work. I've even walked before and that was about 30 minutes.

Where's your favorite place to eat in Harrisonburg?

Jordan: Mr. J's Bagels! When we were living in LA, my father in-law would buy Egg Everything Bagels from Mr. J's, vacuum seal them and FedEx them to us. It was like Christmas when they arrived. They still tasted fresh and great. We searched LA for a better bagel and couldn't find it. I also love Bella Luna Pizza and can confidently say it rivals some of the best pizza places in LA, that *tried* to make authentic wood-fire Italian pizza. Harrisonburg knows how to do bread and cheese apparently!

Emily: My favorite place is Billy Jacks, which happens to be on the same block as where I work, which is dangerous. Being right out of college, I like that it's a young, loud, crowded atmosphere. Harrisonburg has so many places to eat and they're all so different – sushi, hibachi, steakhouse, Chipotle, Bella Luna, Clementine. They're all unique and good.

Ramzoullah: It depends on my cravings. I like Qdoba. I also like Vito's Italian Restaurant on Port Republic. I love their food.

Do you have any favorite local shops in the city?

Jordan: It's kind of random, but I love Gift & Thrift. You never know what kind of great finds will be in there so it's fun to stop by and see what \$10 might get you. Locals know to keep an eye on the fresh inventory so generally if there's something you like, get it while it's available because it'll likely be gone shortly after you leave! My wife, jokingly, tells me I should go every time I'm on my way home from work.

Emily: One of my favorite shops is The Yellow Button, which is a clothing boutique store. There's also The Laughing Dog which has all sorts of odds and ends in there that I like.

Ramzoullah: I'm a tech guy, so I don't shop that much. When I do, it usually is at the major national retailers. I like Best Buy for looking at new gadgets and tech.

Finish this sentence – The best thing about Harrisonburg is....

Jordan: The cost of living to quality of life ratio is completely in balance, and the people in this community are about as genuine as they come.

Emily: The people. At JMU they talk about how everyone holds doors open for each other and I think that's true throughout the city. If you see somebody behind you, you hold the door open for another 10 seconds and help somebody out.

Ramzoullah: The size. It's not too small and it's not too big where you get lost in the crowd. It's just right, so if you do something unique in the city, you'll get noticed.



Thank you all very much. Any last words about Harrisonburg?

Jordan: I thought I might feel like I was taking a step backward...the idea of living in the big city for so long and then moving to the exact opposite kind of city in just about every way. But I look forward to what each new day brings and genuinely feel like I'm living my life now as opposed to how I felt I was just a slave to the grind before. I know a lot of people in larger cities that, if the right job opportunities presented themselves in smaller towns like Harrisonburg, would drop everything and run to live like this.

Emily: A lot of people who I graduated with had to move away, and they're jealous that I found a job here. They want to move back. They want to stay here if they could find a job they like. They would love to stay.

Ramzoullah: This city really grows on you, especially if you're not familiar with the area. When I first moved here from New York, I thought, oh it's a small city, there's not much to do. But then once I left and lived in Northern Virginia for a couple of years, I really missed Harrisonburg and what it offers. The city had really grown on me, so I decided to leave Northern Virginia and live in Harrisonburg.