
Inspiring the Future **Community & Giving** March 31, 2025

\$5 million gift from Springer-Lu Family Foundation to support VUMC's Aspirnaut program

Aspirnaut is a K-20 STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) pipeline that supports immersive summer research experiences for talented high school and undergraduate students.



Aspirnaut Lu-Springer Research Scholars (photo by Erin O. Smith)

By: Sarah Wolf

A \$5 million gift from the Springer-Lu Family Foundation of Massachusetts will establish an endowment to support the [Aspirnaut program](#) at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. Supporters are invited to match this lead gift through a [collective fundraising effort](#) to secure Aspirnaut's future.

Aspirnaut, a K-20 STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) pipeline, has changed the trajectory of students' lives while developing the STEM workforce of tomorrow. Each summer, talented high school and undergraduate students selected as Aspirnaut research scholars attend an immersive experience as a member of a research team at VUMC.

"Under the guidance of Drs. Billy and Julie Hudson, Aspirnaut continues to open doors and transform lives through the unique educational opportunities afforded the scholars. The Springer-Lu Family Foundation's generous gift will help ensure the future of this special program," said Jeff Balser, MD, PhD, President and CEO of VUMC and Dean of Vanderbilt University School of Medicine.

Founded in 2006 by the Hudsons, Aspirnaut has brought 362 students from mostly rural areas of 34 states to VUMC for summer research, professional skills development and wellness training. Nearly 80% of participants are now in an advanced STEM degree program or in the STEM workforce. In a typical summer, there are approximately 20 high school scholars and 10-15 college scholars. Each scholar works with a faculty mentor whose research teams fully integrate the Aspirnaut participant to ensure a rich discovery experience.



Julie Hudson, MD, MA, executive director of Aspirnaut, and Billy Hudson, PhD, Aspirnaut co-founder and scientific director (photo by Daniel Dubois)

"We're deeply grateful to Dr. Chafen Lu and the Springer-Lu Family Foundation for the visionary support of the Lu-Springer High School Research Scholars," said Aspirnaut scientific director and co-founder [Billy Hudson](#), PhD, Elliott V. Newman Professor of Medicine. "Philanthropy here is even more than supporting a single scholar — it's about developing solutions to the largest problems our society faces. From the causes of disease to improved health care delivery to technological innovation, these issues demand a robust STEM workforce."

The gift from the Springer-Lu Family Foundation builds on their previous support and will endow the program's high school research scholars. New commitments

will ensure high school and undergraduate scholars benefit from endowed funding.

Chafen Lu, PhD, a Harvard scientist and biotech industry expert, has deep interest in cultivating STEM opportunities for rural youth. The timing of the gift corresponds with increasing calls to improve K-12 STEM education and grow STEM talent to bolster the United States' science workforce and leadership.

"I have great confidence in the Aspirnaut program, which has a proven record of providing students — especially those from rural areas — with opportunities to thrive and become future STEM leaders," said Lu. "My family and I look forward to joining others who believe that investing in young minds today will shape STEM innovation and leadership of tomorrow."

"We are very hopeful that others will respond to this call for support," said Julie Hudson, MD, MA, Aspirnaut executive director and co-founder. "With additional community investment at this opportune time, Aspirnaut is well positioned to address the critical need for STEM leaders throughout our country."

To make a gift, visit vanderbilthealth.org/aspirnaut.