



Editor: Rachel Baugh

Photo Credit: Erin Smith

Season's Greetings from Aspirnaut™

A Spectacular 2025!!



[Click photo to watch video](#)

We received a \$5 million gift from the Springer-Lu Family Foundation...to support Aspirnaut's vision and

secure its future.

This incredibly generous lead gift supports developing solutions to the largest problems our society faces by identifying and training the STEM workforce of the future. [Read about it here](#)

We filmed a video...about Aspirnauts, mission, and goals

featuring the Lu-Springer High School Research Scholars and Undergraduate Aspirnaut™ Summer Research Internships. Click the photo above to view...

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We were featured in *People* magazine...a story about Aspirnaut's "why" and how one scientist is paying it forward.

[View here....](#)

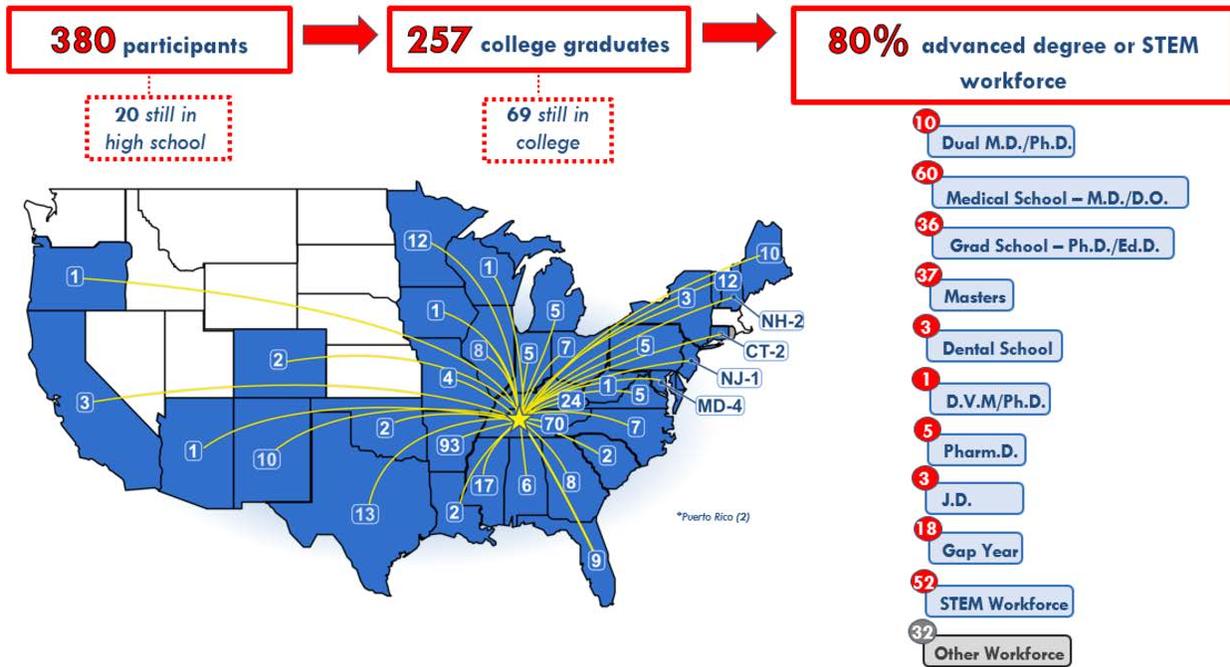
We celebrated Aspirnaut successes...from high school graduations to remarkable "next steps" in educational and career journeys, Aspirnauts succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.

Thesis defenses, faculty appointments, graduate school admissions, and college full rides were all part of this success story.

We expanded our footprint in the Arkansas Delta...and made discovery science a reality in a rural high school classroom.

The Aspirnaut Chemical Biology Lab at Wynne High School team discovered new genes. Aquariums in science classrooms and new partnerships with schools is making a difference in STEM education. [Read about it here.](#)

And, here's our data...



*205 High School Interns
175 Undergraduate Interns

We are grateful for you...

Our heartfelt thanks for your continued partnership and support. Your contributions have been instrumental in making our students' aspirations and dreams a reality.

Aspirnaut™ continues to grow and expand to help talented students gain access to STEM opportunities. We couldn't do it without your support. Thank you for making an impact on the next generation of STEM leaders!

Keep reading for the latest Aspirnaut achievements and news...

QuestBridge Matches!!!

Three Aspirnaut™ Lu-Springer Research Scholars were selected as Questbridge National College Match finalists and matched! Congratulations to **Hamdi Mohamed**, **Russell Paulino**, and **Max Reif**. QuestBridge connects exceptional youth to selective colleges and universities and provides full, four-year scholarships, including expenses, to QuestBridge college partners.

- **Hamdi Mohamed** is a 2025 Aspirnaut™ participant from Lewiston, Maine, and matched at **Bowdoin College**.
- **Russell Paulino** is a 2025 Aspirnaut™ participant from Wynne, Arkansas, and matched at **Wesleyan University**.
- **Max Reif** is a 2025 Aspirnaut™ participant from Burlington, Vermont, and matched at **Yale University**.



Hamdi Mohamed
Lewiston High School
Bowdoin College



Russell Paulino
Wynne High School
Wesleyan University



Max Reif
Burlington High School
Yale University

Early Decision

Congratulations to **Madison Foster!**

- **Madison Foster** was a 2025 Aspironaut™ participant and will graduate from Winnfield Senior High School in Winnfield, Louisiana. Madison has been awarded a full scholarship during early decision at **Spelman College** in Atlanta, Georgia.



December College Graduations

Congratulations to **Jalen Smith and Marquala Whitman!**

- **Jalen L. Smith** was a 2024 and 2025 Aspironaut™ participant and graduated from Tennessee State University with a degree in biology. He will attend **The Ohio State University College of Pharmacy** for a PharmD.
- **Marquala Whitman** was a 2024 Aspironaut™ participant and graduated from Bethune-Cookman University. She is currently applying to dental schools.



Jalen L. Smith
Tennessee State University

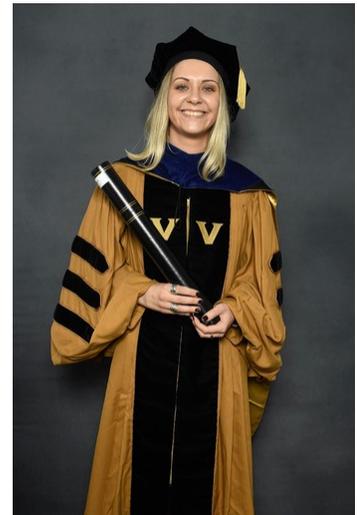


Marquala Whitmon
Bethune-Cookman University

Featured Aspirnaut™: Kateryna Nabukhotna

1. Tell me a little about your background.

I was born and raised in Khmelnytskyi City, Ukraine. I grew up in a family that fostered my inquisitive nature, and over time, I became curious about the causes and treatments of various diseases that can be scientifically explained. Eventually, I realized I wanted to become a scientist who contributes to the emergence of new knowledge that benefits society. My parents always emphasized the importance of making your own opportunities and doing good in the world with high integrity – values that continue to guide me today.



2. What are the major influences in your educational and career path?

As a freshman in high school, I was awarded a Future Leaders Exchange Program scholarship to attend a U.S. high school and live with a volunteer host family for one year. This program had an incredibly positive impact on my leadership, self-reliance, and English skills. This experience encouraged me to consider college opportunities in the U.S. As a result, I was accepted to Berea College, one of America's top colleges that awards students with excellent academic promise but limited financial resources, the 'No Tuition Promise Scholarship'. I would not be where I am today without the opportunities provided by Berea.

3. What challenges have you experienced along your educational journey?

For me, the hardest thing along my educational journey has always been the sacrifice. Pursuing education far away from home has meant missing out on family time and many other memorable moments. Consequently, the best feeling is being able to share my accomplishments with my family and mentors.

4. How did you hear about Aspirnaut™? What made you apply?

I heard about Aspirnaut™ through Berea College's strategic partnership with Vanderbilt University Medical Center (another reason why Berea has been so influential to me). I was looking for an opportunity to build a solid foundation in biomedical research that would make me a competitive graduate school applicant. Aspirnaut™ offered exactly that, and even more, and I did not hesitate to apply.



5. How has Aspirnaut™ impacted you?

Besides getting invaluable research experience at Dr. Roy Zent's lab, Aspirnaut™ left a lasting and inspirational mark on me. Hearing powerful stories from professionals who overcame significant challenges showed me that anything is possible when you are passionate, willing to work hard, and committed to long-term goals. The program also taught me the importance of paying it forward.

6. Is there a particular moment during your summers with Aspirnaut™ that stands out for you?

I immediately think about how we got to travel to present our research at the American Society of Nephrology Kidney Week through a STARS Scholarship and the NIH/NIDDK/KUH Summer Undergraduate Research Conference. It was wonderful to practice our communication skills, be exposed to other scientific communities, and spend time together in informal settings as a group.

7. What is your proudest achievement or contribution to science? In life?

Right now, my first-author papers feel like my most significant scientific achievements because they address understudied topics in the field and represent years of hard work and dedication in graduate school and the lab of Dr. Borden Lacy. In my life broadly, I'm proud of myself for taking chances even when the path ahead has felt intimidating.

8. What motivates you?

My main motivation is dedication to my craft and a desire to maximize its positive impact on communities around the world. I am also passionate about sharing my knowledge and supporting future generations of scientists and medical professionals, especially from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

9. What are your future goals and aspirations?

My future aspiration is to contribute to a body of scientific work that has a meaningful, positive impact on human health and global healthcare. Along the way, I hope my story inspires others to bet on themselves and chase their dreams.

Aspirnaut™ Alumni Connect in Nashville and Beyond

November was an exciting month for the Aspirnaut™ community, featuring two special events designed to foster connections and highlight available resources for participants.

On November 13th, the inaugural Aspirnaut™ Alumni gathering took place in Nashville and included Aspirnauts who are attending or affiliated with Vanderbilt. The evening was a wonderful opportunity for alumni to reconnect, network with one another, and celebrate the shared experiences of the program.

The momentum continued on November 15th as VUMC faculty—Dr. Billy Hudson, Dr. Bradley Clarke, and Dr. Sun Peck—connected with Aspirnauts attending Johns Hopkins University.

These gatherings underscore the enduring mission of Aspirnaut™ to build a strong, supportive community and powerful network for all who have participated in Aspirnaut™.



2025 Application is OPEN! Deadline: January 14, 2026

We are accepting applications for Lu-Springer High School Research Scholars and Undergraduate Aspirnaut™ Summer Research Internships. We are looking for students who have achieved excellent grades and test scores in math and science and who have demonstrated a commitment to pursuing a career in a STEM field.

To learn more about the high school program, Click [HERE](#)

To learn more about the undergraduate program, Click [HERE](#)

Social Media

We are increasing our presence on social media to keep you updated on all things Aspirnaut™. Be sure to follow Aspirnaut™ on Facebook and Instagram.



[DONATE NOW](#)

If you are interested in getting involved or sponsoring an Aspirnaut™ experience, please contact Rachel Baugh at rachel.baugh@aspirnaut.org.

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