

# Class of 2014: Domonique Bragg and Cody Stothers are Aspirnaut pioneers



**Seniors Domonique Bragg** and Cody Stothers, who both hail from rural Arkansas, followed a similar path to Vanderbilt.

Bragg and Stothers were the first high school students to participate in the university's [Aspirnaut](#) educational outreach program. They're also now the first Aspirnaut alumni to graduate from Vanderbilt, fulfilling a dream that began almost a decade ago with [Billy Hudson](#), the Elliot V. Newman Professor of Medicine, Biochemistry and Pathology and director of Vanderbilt's [Center for Matrix Biology](#).

Aspirnaut, which provides educational opportunities in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) to rural communities, was inspired by Hudson's own journey from rural poverty to a career in scientific research. Since 2006, he and wife [Julie Hudson](#), co-founder of Aspirnaut and assistant vice chancellor for health affairs at [Vanderbilt University Medical Center](#), have introduced hundreds of students to STEM career paths they wouldn't have been exposed to otherwise.

Bragg participated in the [Aspirnaut Summer Research Internship Program](#) following her junior year of high school. Gaining hands-on experience in a Vanderbilt lab convinced her to apply to the university. “In high school we learned about theories but never had any labs,” she said. “[rquote]Coming here made it so much more tangible. You could touch and see things. I was fascinated by that”

Stothers had a similar eye-opening experience. “It was so challenging and thought-provoking,” he remembered. “By the end of the summer, I was amazed by how much we’d learned.”

So amazed, in fact, that Stothers, who has a double major in [molecular biology](#) and [philosophy](#), continued working in Billy Hudson’s lab after enrolling at Vanderbilt. He even served as a resident adviser for the Aspirnaut program’s summer interns.

The program’s benefits were not just academic. Both students faced hardships at home—Stothers was raised by a disabled grandmother in Sheridan, Ark., after his mother gave birth to him in prison, and Bragg lost her father during her third year of college—but neither had to look far for a supportive network of mentors and friends.

“The Hudsons really get to know the students—it’s personal to them. I knew if I attended Vanderbilt, there would be someone here looking out for me,” Bragg said. She has a [multidisciplinary major in public policy](#) and plans to teach near her hometown of West Helena, Ark., after graduation.

Stothers, meanwhile, has received a full scholarship to the joint M.D./Ph.D. program at Vanderbilt’s [School of Medicine](#). Given the path he’s traveled, it’s hard to fault him for wanting to relish his college experience a little while longer.

“I never want to be a real adult,” he said jokingly. “The program is seven years long. at’s seven more years that I get to avoid words like ‘mortgage.’”



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