

Voices of the NIH Community

“You aspire, you seek, you achieve, and you pay it forward”

With NIH grant support, Professor Billy Hudson started the Aspirnaut summer research internship program for underprivileged students at Vanderbilt University. Dr. Hudson and the first Aspirnaut, Cody Stothers, reflect on growing up in abusive and impoverished families and how education offered them a way out.

Transcript

Cody Stothers: My mom was in prison for drugs and some other things and I was born in the hospital attached there. And my grandmother, on Christmas Eve, drove to Pine Bluff and picked me up and the way that she had to take me home was actually in a Christmas stocking because she didn't have a stroller or anything like that. So, I came back to Sheridan, a town with 3,000 people and two stoplights and started off. She didn't have a lot of money – she's actually disabled and gets a disability pension; that's her only source of income. So we had some tough times.

Billy Hudson: We grew up in homes that were 15 miles apart.

Cody Stothers: Fifty years and 15 miles.

Billy Hudson: You had your challenges, so did I. I'm a survivor of child abuse. I had nobody to ever go to and I'm very fortunate to be at Vanderbilt because of special people, mentors who came into my life.

Cody Stothers: From a pretty young age, I just was interested in learning. When I got a little bit older, realized that was sort of the ticket to get out. And I got a phone call saying teachers had recommended you for this summer research program at this place called Vanderbilt that I hadn't really ever heard of. I mean I knew that it was a good college, but didn't know anything about it. It was six hours away in Nashville, but I had this opportunity to come do research for six weeks.

Billy Hudson: The Aspirnaut Program is how we met, a special program that the NIH was supporting to help us find talented young men and women to bring them into science.

Cody Stothers: I ended up coming to Vanderbilt University in no small part thanks to you and to the Aspirnaut Program and we get to talk more and realize that coming from that background influenced our lives, I would say.

Billy Hudson: Yeah. We both had help, you see.

Cody Stothers: That's right.

Billy Hudson: You're the first Aspirnaut; you're the poster child. You represent so much about what we try to do to help others because you're the future. Cody, you're the next generation of scientist. You represent that and so I'm dedicated to replicating this program with other universities if possible, to reach those talented people in those disadvantaged backgrounds because they can enrich our society. They can solve some society problems and they are the bridge back to their communities.

Cody Stothers: And we have a whole host of Aspirnauts who have come to the program and first person in their family to go to college, just like you and I were. And they're on their way to getting careers and being able to support their families and their towns.

Billy Hudson: You're really a great ambassador for what I think characterizes the Aspirnaut Program. You aspire, you seek, you achieve and you pay it forward; you're a fantastic person. But I have a special feeling that there are many wonderful, talented students like you, in disadvantaged backgrounds that need an opportunity.