

USET Member Students attend summer internship at Vanderbilt University

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. – What did you want to be when you were growing up? In rural American Indian communities there are students that have dreams to be professionals in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM Careers). The Aspirnaut Program at Vanderbilt University (VU) is working to encourage young rural students to reach their dreams while giving them resources and real life experiences in STEM fields so that they may become doctors, engineers, telecommunication specialists, or math teachers and professors.

United South and Eastern Tribes, Incorporated (USET) is participating with Vanderbilt University (VU) to create opportunities for American Indian youth and high school students to work in research laboratories and fields of their interests through a six week internship. Two USET member students, rising Senior Taloa Berg and rising junior Nicodemus Bushyhead of Cherokee High School, have been participating this summer in Nashville, Tennessee at VU Medical Center.

Berg is working with VU scientists on gene mutations in *ies*. She has a goal to attend medical school and become a pediatrician. While attending the Aspirnaut Program, she has worked with researchers on development of human genes and what may make impacts on normal development.

Berg says that she is torn between wanting to be a pediatrician or becoming a research physician after this experience, “I have thought about a career back home at our hospital (Choctaw) because my dad works there. Any student that is really into science, math or medicine should go for this program. It will open your eyes to a lot of things.”

Bushyhead is testing new steroid drugs that will help prevent kidney disease by regulating blood pressure and lowering the risk of associated liver damage. He says that his goal is to attend college to become a pharmacist, return home and open a pharmacy on the Cherokee Indian Reservation.

“Working here in these labs (at Vanderbilt University) has helped me understand the work and steps it will take to be a pharmacist,” Bushyhead says. He also says the experience opened his eyes to the many other possibilities that this program has to offer and where the work of pharmacy can take him, not just someone who dispenses medicine at a drugstore.



Taloa Berg, rising senior at Choctaw Central High School (Mississippi) and Nicodemus Bushyhead, a rising junior at Cherokee High School attended summer internships at Vanderbilt University.

(USET Photo)

This summer, USET and Vanderbilt University provided sponsorship for the two member students to attend the Aspirnaut Program. According to USET Tribal Health Program Support Director Tihtiyas (Dee) Sabattus, next summer opportunities for as many as 10 students may exist with assistance from a Native American Research Centers for Health (NARCH7) grant.

“Our goal is to see that the students are exposed to great working opportunities in their field and become inspired to continue their education to achieve that goal. Our ideal outcome is to see them return to their community and employ their skills for their tribe. If the students like Nashville, then we want to foster opportunities here at USET, Indian Health Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, or even the private sector,” says Sabattus.

Sabattus adds the Aspirnaut Program has great potential to make positive changes in the lives of young students due to the vision and energy given by its founders Billy Hudson, Ph.D. and Julie Hudson, M.D. M.A.. Billy G. Hudson is the Elliot V. Newman Professor of Medicine, Biochemistry and Pathology, and Director of the Center for Matrix Biology at Vanderbilt University and a graduate of Grapevine High School in Grapevine, Arkansas. Julie Hudson, M.D., is a pediatric anesthesiologist with a background that includes development work, governmental relations and science training, who was named Assistant Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs at Vanderbilt University in January, 2009. Her role encompasses the area called Medical Center Relations and broadly involves engagement with the community locally to internationally. The program coordinator is Sara Carter, a graduate of Tennessee Tech University.

Aspirnaut is a program based at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. Its founders Billy and Julie Hudson are the visionaries for the program. The Aspirnaut program works to provide opportunity to rural students that do not have resources readily available and have academic gifts and abilities. The program also offers opportunities to younger students in grades three through eight in a virtual learning environment with laptop computers, iPods, and iPads. Aspirnaut work and results have been reviewed and published in the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and US News and World Reports.

– USET

