

# USET honors two students and Vanderbilt announces new opportunity

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**UNCASVILLE, Conn.** – There are new opportunities for youth and hope for a positive future for USET Tribal development. Vanderbilt University Medical Center's Assistant Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs Julie K. Hudson, MD, MA is announcing that the Aspirnaut program has received grant funding from the National Institutes of Health/The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases for the next five years. The new grant funding will allow up to 15 new collegiate undergraduate students to enroll in the Aspirnaut program. Also, two students from USET member Tribes have been honored for their participation this past summer in Aspirnaut. The two students are Choctaw Central High School (Mississippi) Senior Taloa Berg and Cherokee High School junior Nicodemus Bushyhead.

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 Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields so that they may become doctors, engineers, telecommunication specialists, or math teachers and professors. The Aspirnaut Program works to beam information, resources, and research back into rural classroom so that it may involve younger



EBCI tribal member Nicodemus Bushyhead (center) was honored at the annual USET Board of Directors meeting held in Uncasville, Conn. for his participation in the Aspirnaut program. Shown (left-right) are Big Cove Rep. Bo Taylor, Nikki Nations, Bushyhead, Vice Chairman Bill Taylor and Big Cove School Board member Lori Blankenship.

(USET Photo)

students in elementary schools, high schools and collegiate undergraduates. Over 800 students have been recipients of online conferencing and virtual laboratories.

Dr. Hudson told USET leadership, "We think that the partnership works well because it uses the assets of a research university and extends those to rural schools, rural teachers, and rural leaders in education."

The Aspirnaut program has collected data on all of its participants and monitored their progress after leaving the program. There have been no dropouts recorded among the 43 high school students that have participated in the last four summers, and 27 are seeking some form of post secondary training or are enrolled in college according to Dr. Hudson.

Hudson adds, "All but one or two of the 27 in college are enrolled in a STEM related field of study."

Hudson says that the remaining 16 students are still in high school and data is showing that they are making good grades. "Our data is showing that we are increasing the efficacy of the students and are showing positive progress in the classroom."

The two USET students attended the Annual Board of Directors meeting, and the USET Board honored the students with song and gifts, as well as Dr. Julie Hudson and her Husband Billy Hudson, who is a professor of medicine at Vanderbilt and visionary for the Aspirnaut program.

Taloe Berg worked this past summer with VU scientists on gene mutations in flies. Berg 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.

She says that she is torn between wanting to be a pediatrician and 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," Berg commented. "It (Aspirnaut Program) has made a big impact on me and made me understand I needed to do more work to prepare for college," Berg told USET leaders.

Nicodemus Bushyhead conducted testing on new steroid drugs that will help prevent kidney disease by regulating blood pressure and lowering the risk of associated liver damage during his six weeks at Vanderbilt this past summer. Bushyhead 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. Bushyhead 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. He told the USET Board of Directors, "This program that we got into makes you realize that there is work to be done when you are taking your classes in high school that will help make your way into college and do what you want to do as a career."

For several USET Tribes the goal is to improve the standard of living. The Aspirnaut program works gather a diverse group of students and create unique approaches in seeking solutions for challenges in science. The students gain experience and possibly a new foothold in gaining acceptance to first rate universities. The Tribes may benefit from highly trained students. Dr. Hudson says the hope is that these students will go into a field of science. But, if they become leaders, teachers, administrators they will have critical thinking skills, understand how to influence lawmakers on funding innovations in science that will make positive affects in their community, and become positive role models for the future.

USET Executive Director Kitcki Carroll echoes Hudson's remarks saying, "We are most excited about what has occurred up to this point. One of the things that I want to point out why this relationship with Vanderbilt is so critical is that we often talk about Nation building or Nation re-building, which is more appropriate to say. We must always remember in our efforts to rebuilding communities that it is going to take all kinds of skill sets, all sorts of expertise. It's not just all attorneys, not just all educators, it's not just all scientists, and we need everything to make the communities strong. It through the efforts and examples that you (Nicodemus and Taloa) are setting that's going to allow these collective nations to become empowered to do what they want to do."

Carroll also invited Berg and Bushyhead to become the initial co-chairs on a USET Youth Advisory committee. "We really need that voice and that prospective from the USET Youth talking as we are talking about the growth and direction of this organization. We are most appreciative of this relationship. We have high hopes for this relationship and we have high hopes for the futures of Nicodemus and Taloa," Carroll told USET.

USET President Brian Patterson told Tribal leadership it must do everything to provide resources to USET Tribal youth. "We know in our home lands. We know in our teachings. We know when we invoke the power of a good mind in principle throughout our nations that we do so with the future generations in mind. We do so while talking of the future seven generations. For the seven generations to meet their challenges we must prepare our leaders of today. We must give them all the strength, all the courage, all the compassion that we can so they can advance their generation and future generations," Patterson said.

Vanderbilt is ready to begin taking applications for its new round of Aspirnaut programs for undergraduate students.