

# THE TENNESSEAN

## NEWS

# Born in prison, student now excels at Vanderbilt

By Tom Wilemon; The Tennessean

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Born on Dec. 23 in a prison hospital and raised by a disabled grandmother, Cody Stothers grew up depending on “angel tree” strangers for Christmas gifts and not expecting birthday presents.

This week, he got his best present ever when he turned 22. The Vanderbilt University student learned Monday that he had been accepted on a full scholarship into the institution’s M.D./Ph.D. program — a parallel degree path toward becoming a physician and research scientist.

Stothers, who comes from Sheridan, Ark., a town with three traffic lights and a faucet factory, ended up at Vanderbilt because of an outreach mission aimed at gifted students from rural areas and disadvantaged backgrounds. The program, known as Aspirnaut, focuses on science, technology, engineering and math. It spurs kindergarten-age children to wonder, shows middle-schoolers the thrill of discovery and gives graduating seniors a more certain path toward college.

Founded in 2006 by husband-and-wife Vanderbilt professors, Aspirnaut began with a simple idea. Billy Hudson, a professor of biochemistry who overcame being a high school dropout and had fled an abusive home, wanted to mentor others and pass along the favors people had done for him. Aspirnaut put computers on school buses traveling from the Arkansas community where Hudson grew up to Sheridan.

Stothers was brought into the program to help the younger students with their computer skills. Since its founding, Aspirnaut, which relies on public contributions to fulfill its mission, has worked with students in eight states.

Had it not been for his grandmother, Stothers would never have gotten the bus assignment that led him to Vanderbilt. Frances Taylor, a former nursing aide disabled on the job from lifting a heavy patient, took him home from the prison hospital in a stocking like the ones children hang up for Santa.

“He came home Christmas Eve,” Taylor said. “He was my Christmas present.” She raised him on a disability check income of less than \$10,000 a year, making frequent trips to the town library, where the books were free.

“She made it pretty obvious to me that if I wanted to have a life that was different than a lot of people in my family of poverty and just not really having a lot of resources that I was going to have to go to college and get an education,” Stothers said.

She had cooked him a traditional white birthday cake jazzed up with green, pink, gold and blue decorations, when the call came about the scholarship. Stothers already knew he had been accepted to Vanderbilt medical school, but he was waiting to hear about the dual-degree program.

He has already been involved in research through the Aspirnaut program. This month, he and 82 other students involved in the program co-authored a journal article in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. It explained how a chemical bond discovered by Vanderbilt scientists might someday be a pathway for new drug therapies for cancer and other diseases.

“My group in 2009 made the discovery of a new chemical bond,” said Hudson, the biochemistry professor who is the program’s scientific director. “It was made in the cow kidney. Then the question immediately was, what animals have this bond? And where did it begin? To do that, you march through the animal kingdom — along the tree of life.”

The experiments involving individual species to identify the bond were the perfect opportunity to set up students for epiphany moments, he said. “They would have that data first that no other human had ever seen and it would be discovery,” he said.

His wife, Dr. Julie Hudson, a professor of anesthesiology and pediatrics, serves as executive director of Aspirnaut. In that role, she works with teachers in setting up learning opportunities. During this school year, the program will have 245 Tennessee students participating in weekly labs, including 50 from Springfield Middle School.

Aspirnaut is looking to expand into Robertson County elementary schools. The program also has touched the lives of children in Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, Maine and Montana.

It has made a grandmother in Arkansas very proud of the baby she brought home in a Christmas stocking. She said she knew as soon as she saw him at the prison hospital that she wanted to raise him. “I wanted to take care of him,” Taylor said. “I still feel like I’m raising him today, but he’s more raising me now.”

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The Aspirnaut program depends upon scholarship sponsors to fund its work. To learn more about the program and giving opportunities, visit [www.aspirnaut.org](http://www.aspirnaut.org).