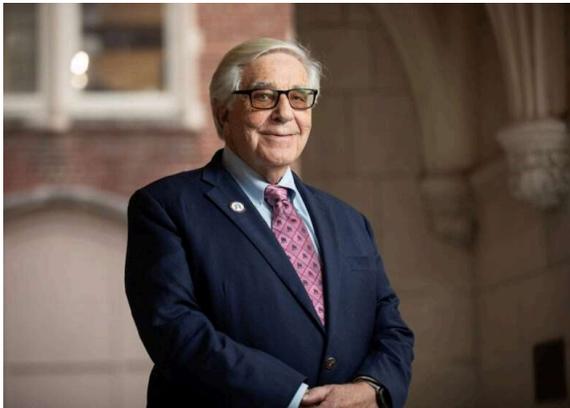


Inspiring the Future February 25, 2026

Billy Hudson named 2026 Ellis Island Medal of Honor recipient

Leaders in government, business, military, media and technology will be honored with the prestigious Ellis Island Medals of Honor on May 16 during gala on Ellis Island.



Billy Hudson, PhD, is a recipient of the 2026 Ellis Island Medal of Honor. (photo by Erin O. Smith)

By: Craig Boerner and Bill Snyder

Billy Hudson, PhD, director of the Vanderbilt Center for Matrix Biology and the Elliott V. Newman Professor of Medicine, is receiving the Ellis Island Medal of Honor in 2026, following a unanimous decision by [Ellis Island Honors Society \(EIHS\)](#)

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\$5 million gift from Springer-Lu Family Foundation to support VUMC's Aspirnaut program

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Chairman Nasser J. Kazeminy and the EIHS Board of Directors.

A native of rural Grapevine, Arkansas, [Hudson](#) joins the ranks of several U.S. presidents, Nobel laureates and influential leaders, including former President Bill Clinton and country music singer Glen Campbell, as people from Arkansas to receive the honor. [Naji Abumrad](#), MD, a 2004 medalist, is also a Vanderbilt recipient.

Hudson was nominated by 2022 medalist [Igor Babailov](#), Hon.RAA, KStA, the world-renowned portrait artist who has been affiliated with the Hudson family and the [Aspirnaut STEM Pipeline](#), founded to increase opportunities in science for talented youth from rural and diverse backgrounds, for more than a decade.

EIHS Chairman Kazeminy said Hudson was selected in recognition of his pioneering contributions to matrix biology and transformative discoveries in type IV collagen research, which have fundamentally advanced the understanding of kidney disease, including Alport syndrome, Goodpasture’s disease and diabetic kidney disease.

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Aspirnaut Billy Hudson

Department of Medicine

Division of Nephrology and Hypertension

His decades of scientific leadership, groundbreaking structural insights into basement membrane biology, and successful translation of research into therapeutic innovation have shaped modern biomedical science, Kazeminy said. Equally inspiring was Hudson's dedication to expanding opportunity in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) through initiatives such as the Aspinaut STEM Pipeline, reflecting a commitment not only to discovery, but to developing the next generation of scientific leaders.



Billy Hudson, PhD, whose pioneering scientific contributions have fundamentally advanced the understanding of kidney disease, speaks with Mohamed Rafi, MS, a research assistant in the Division of Nephrology and Hypertension at Vanderbilt Health. (photo by Erin O. Smith)

“Dr. Hudson’s personal and professional journey serves an inspiration to many. Selection for this prestigious honor is fitting given his substantial contributions to the field of science and for the numerous

young lives he and his wife, Julie, continue to impact through the Aspirnaut program. I want to offer my sincere congratulations to Billy for achieving this distinguished award," said Jeff Balser, MD, PhD, President and Chief Executive Officer of Vanderbilt Health and Dean of Vanderbilt University School of Medicine.

Hudson is accepting the award on behalf of his wife, Julie Hudson, MD, brother Johnny Hudson and sister Ann Kincl, who are co-founders of the Aspirnaut STEM Pipeline; his 13 high school classmates who helped implement the pipeline; and the nearly 400 high school and undergraduate students who have participated in the pipeline over the past two decades.

"I am so very excited and humbled to be selected for the Ellis Island Medal of Honor. My [journey from poverty and childhood abuse, which led to me dropping out of high school, to becoming a scientist](#), and now a medalist, is like being in 'The Twilight Zone,' where an ordinary person encounters extraordinary circumstances," Hudson said.

“My mentors provided educational opportunities that enabled me to overcome my childhood challenges and establish the Aspirnaut Pipeline to help youth achieve their dreams. Education fuels hope and opportunity for a better tomorrow for all people, especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds,” he said.

Founded in 1986 by EIHS, the honor is presented annually to individuals who have demonstrated “outstanding commitment to serving our nation either professionally, culturally or civically” and “reflect a proud commitment to our nation’s ideals of diversity, opportunity and service,” according to the organization.

“Dr. Hudson’s selection is a testament to a lifetime devoted to excellence, integrity and meaningful impact. His pioneering contributions and steadfast commitment to advancing knowledge embody the very spirit of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor,” EIHS Chairman Kazeminy said. “We are proud to celebrate his accomplishments and extend our heartfelt congratulations on this well-deserved recognition,” he said.

E IHS has honored distinguished and diverse Americans including eight U.S. presidents; Nobel laureates Elie Wiesel and Malala Yousufzai; Generals Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell; Justice Sandra Day O'Connor; Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton; Bob Hope; Muhammad Ali; Frank Sinatra; Rosa Parks; Mike Wallace; and Rita Moreno.

The 2025 medalists included Her Majesty Queen Silvia of Sweden; Pfizer Chairman and CEO, Dr. Albert Bourla; Co-Founder of Moderna, Robert Langer; and Nobel Prize-Winning Physicist, Steven Chu.

The Ellis Island Medals of Honor ranks among the nation's most renowned awards, officially recognized by the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, with each year's recipients listed in the Congressional Record.

A total of 94 Americans will be honored in 2026 for their contributions in philanthropy, humanitarian advocacy, technological and medical innovation, and professional achievements.

From visionaries in the business and scientific fields, and members of the local, state and federal government, to philanthropists and influencers in the entertainment and sports industry, each medalist has embraced their personal immigrant history and recognizes the role that uniquely American opportunities played in helping them reach their goals.

“These individuals stand as beacons of resilience, embodying the timeless values of courage, compassion and dedication,” Kazeminy said. “Their diverse backgrounds and remarkable accomplishments serve as a testament to the power of unity and the boundless potential of the human spirit. As we recognize their indelible contributions, let us reaffirm our commitment to fostering inclusivity, understanding and goodwill across all borders.”

The full list of this year’s recipients will be announced in early March, and the medal ceremony will take place Saturday, May 16, during a black-tie gala held in Ellis Island’s Great Hall, which served as the gateway for 12 million immigrants to the U.S.

EIHS is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, which, in addition to presenting the Ellis Island Medals of Honor, is a humanitarian organization supporting educational opportunities for students with immigrant heritage and preserving the Ellis Island National Monument.

For more details on the event and a complete list of honorees, please visit [EIHS official site](#).