Calling it quite simply the best opportunity of his career, Dr. J. Bennet Waters couldn’t resist the chance to help start one of the most important offices within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security—the office of the Chief Medical Officer.

It has meant endless meetings with other government officials, constant pressures in such a high-profile environment, and daily responses to potential homeland security threats.

Have we also mentioned that Waters, who has a master’s degree in public health and a doctorate in health administration, is teaching a graduate course for the UNC School of Public Health’s Department of Health Policy and Administration (HPAA) during this 2006-2007 academic year?

It’s hectic, but the offer to become part of the Department of Homeland Security was just too good to pass up. He began his position in Washington D.C., in December 2005, just four months after starting his position as assistant professor and deputy director for executive programs in HPAA. He is now “on loan” to Homeland Security until December 2008. Prior to joining the School’s faculty, Waters was president and chief operating officer for Piedmont Healthcare Management group in Charlotte, N.C. Before that, he was administrative director of the emergency department at Carolinas Medical Center, a Level-1 trauma center and academic teaching hospital in Charlotte.

“A year ago, who would have thought I would be spending time in the White House, meeting with Cabinet Secretaries and working on Capitol Hill?” Waters says. “It’s just phenomenal.”

It’s no simple task either.

As chief of staff for Homeland Security’s Chief Medical Officer, Waters must “make the trains run on time”—meaning he had to help develop a strategic plan for the office, build an enduring infrastructure, and execute the plan. He navigates the budgetary and fiscal waters of the federal government and deftly avoids turf battles to implement the vision of his boss and mentor, Dr. Jeffrey Runge.

“Using a private sector perspective, it’s similar to a startup situation in which one has an idea, gets some working capital and then builds a functional organization,” Waters says.

The Office of the Chief Medical Officer has four primary responsibilities: (1) coordinate the department’s biodefense activities; (2) ensure the department has a unified approach to medical preparedness; (3) develop and maintain workforce protection and occupational health standards for the department; and (4) serve as the Secretary of Homeland Security’s principal medical advisor, providing real-time incident management guidance. For Waters, the experience gained in Washington will be invaluable in the classroom.

“I’ve developed my syllabi using a combination of personal experiences, a review of the literature and my ongoing engagement with the community preparedness and disaster management arenas,” Waters says. “It’s really exciting to be a part of both worlds.”

Now, if he could just figure out a way to make both worlds be in the same location.

Twenty years ago, the practice of public health seemed to be sailing along on a sea of successful interventions that had revolutionized the health of the nation, and to a large extent, the world. Vaccinations, sanitation, modern pharmaceuticals and preventive healthcare all seemed to be working miracles.

“We thought we were conquering disease,” says Dr. Dennis Gillings, CBE (Commander of the British Empire), former UNC bio-statistics professor and now chairman and chief executive officer of Quintiles Transnational Corp.

Then along came AIDS, SARS, antibiotic-resistant strains of tuberculosis and malaria…

“Public health is entering a pioneering age again,” he says. “We have a huge human challenge before us.”

To help Carolina’s School of Public Health meet that challenge, Gillings made a gift of $2.4 million that will be further supplemented with a state match to endow the Dennis Gillings Professorship in Biostatistics. The Gillings Distinguished Professorship is held by Dr. Danyu Lin, who came to UNC in 2001 from the University of Washington. Last year, Lin received the prestigious Method to Extend Research in Time (MERIT) Award by the National Institutes of Health. Additionally, Gillings has made several other substantial gifts to support other departmental programs.

As a professor in the biostatistics department from 1971 to 1988, Gillings and UNC Professor of Biostatistics Dr. Gary Koch, along with a handful of graduate students, applied the latest methodologies to the analysis of clinical trial data for pharmaceutical companies. The business was incorporated as Quintiles in 1982. A few years later, Gillings left the School to run the company full time. Quintiles Transnational is now the world’s leading pharmaceutical services company with annual revenues of $2 billion. The work he and Koch started at the School continues, though, with Koch as director of the Biometrics Consulting Laboratory.

Gillings felt inspired to support the School with a professorship endowment for several reasons.

“I was a professor in the School, and that brings a strong affinity to its goals and aspirations,” he says. “Also, while I was here, I learned much of what I needed to know to found Quintiles. This is one way of recognizing the School’s role in the success of the business.”

A third reason for making the donation, he says, was his strong desire to help the School meet the challenges facing public health as efficiently as possible.

“In the ’70s, I detected a somewhat emotional attitude toward public health problems,” he says. “But everything is not automatically worthwhile. Public health resources are not infinite. The success of public health in the future depends on a business mind being part of the equation.”

To meet newer, bolder challenges, and to repeat the amazing public health successes of the past, tough choices have to be made, he says.

“The public relates to individual stories, not statistics” he says, “but the fact is, we have a responsibility to represent public health through broad-based application.”

“The extent of the impact public health practice will ultimately have depends more and more on its ability to combine academic strengths in discovery and training with business strengths in efficiency and finance,” he says. “In other words, do the most good we can with the resources available.”

Gillings sees a critical role for biostatisticians in helping define and advance those applications. “Statisticians have to be more than just mathematicians,” he says.