Growing into Leadership

Nicole Bates seems to be moving quickly up the public health leadership ladder. The current director of government relations for the Global Health Council is a self-described strategic thinker and likes to plan two, three and even four steps ahead while playing with different future scenarios. So you’d think her career trajectory was carefully plotted. There’s only one problem. You’d be wrong.

Bates never set out to be a leader. In fact, she originally found her calling as a policy analyst with the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta shortly after getting her master’s in public health from UNC in human behavior and educational psychology. Reserved by nature, Bates originally felt more comfortable listening carefully to others in group settings than speaking up. She was, after all, often the youngest person in the meetings.

But then something started happening. When she did speak, people listened, especially when others are all over the map with their specific agendas. One of her biggest challenges? “My team and I spend our days working to convince an incredibly diverse set of stakeholders that our priority is their priority,” she says. “It’s not easy. In a single issue, for example, we have to identify elements that resonate with different audiences, yet preserve the issue’s overall integrity.”

Bates says this policy tension has brought out what she considers one of her signature leadership traits—the ability to focus and synthesize differences into a shared platform, especially when others are all over the map with their specific agendas.

“When I step back, I realize that facilitating dialogue and translating stakeholder buy-in into action is something that strong leaders do well,” she says. “Given my work, I have the opportunity to refine that skill almost daily.”

Somehow boundaries don’t seem to fit into any description of Nicole Bates, not when she’s still learning, improving—and, most importantly of all, growing into her leadership role. You’d think she had planned it that way, but of course you’d be wrong.

— By Gene Pinder

School alum revolutionizes study of occupational epidemiology

Dr. Aaron Blair’s first taste of public health came from an unlikely quarter. While working as a lecturer in 1973 at Saint Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, N.C., he was asked to teach a course in human anatomy and physiology.

Problem was, Blair’s undergraduate and master’s degrees were in botany, and his doctorate was in genetics. To learn about human physiology, he chose to attend the UNC School of Public Health.

That decision changed the course of his professional life and gave the study of cancer one of its most accomplished advocates.

Once at UNC, Blair became hooked on epidemiology. He earned his master’s degree from the School in 1976 and went on to pursue a career in public health that culminated as chief of the Occupational and Environmental Epidemiology Branch of the National Cancer Institute (NCI) for more than 25 years.

At NCI, Blair oversaw the expansion of the branch from four investigators to more than 30. He was among the first to revolutionize the study of occupational epidemiology by introducing quantitative and molecular methods of assessing exposure to environmental hazards. His work on case studies among farmers in the Midwest pointed to the role of pesticides and agricultural chemicals in the high incidence of specific types of cancer among the farmer populations. That effort led to the large-scale Agricultural Health Study he pioneered, which measured various health outcomes over a 15-year period among agricultural workers in Iowa and North Carolina.

Over the years, Blair has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the School’s 2007 Barr Distinguished Alumni Award for contributions to public health; the National Institutes of Health Director’s Award; and the John Goldsmith Award for Outstanding Contributions to Epidemiology, for his work on occupational and environmental causes of cancer.

“The UNC School of Public Health is a very high-caliber and prestigious school,” Blair notes, adding that the expertise of scientists at the School and the resources available to students and faculty “come together in helping to further an individual career.”

Blair retired as branch chief at the NCI in 2006. An avid golfer, he now divides his time between academic pursuits, golf and his four grandchildren.