



Drawing strength,  
*experiencing success,*  
now returning to  
**his roots**

**D**r. Dennis Gillings is clearly a man of intent. That is, he intends to excel at everything he does, whether he's running an international clinical research company, pushing protégés to greater heights of accomplishment, staging a "pig pickin'" or competing in ballroom dancing.

Dr. Dennis Gillings joined the UNC Department of Biostatistics faculty in 1971 and began his early teaching career with fellow assistant professor, Dr. Gary Koch, in what was known as "Trailer 39." The trailer was one of three makeshift offices set up in and around parking lots behind Rosenau Hall on the Carolina campus. Gillings served on the School's faculty until 1988. He is now chairman and chief executive officer of Quintiles Transnational Corp.

Wait. Ballroom dancing?

From the age of 15, when his mother said it "is good to be able to dance," he attended the Morris J. School of Ballroom Dancing. When he went to university, he enrolled in a competitive ballroom dancing class and soon captured the championship.

"Well," he says with a shrug, "I worked hard at it."

The 64-year-old London native, a former professor of biostatistics and now chairman and chief executive officer of Quintiles Transnational Corp. (and also Commander of the British Empire, or CBE), works hard at everything he does, propelling himself and those around him to succeed.



PHOTO BY TOM FULDNER

“He has a huge amount of intellectual energy, and especially for graduate students, he is the type of professor who pushes you and really helps you figure out your career,” notes Julie MacMillan, MPH, a former student who now heads Carolina Public Health Solutions at UNC’s School of Public Health.

As a teacher, Gillings was known for being enthusiastic, thorough and generous.

“He’s not just generous with his (financial) donations, he’s generous about sharing his knowledge,” says Dr. Chester W. (Chet) Douglass, a former colleague of Gillings’ at UNC. “Back when we were assistant professors and he’d be consulting, he would just give away his knowledge.”

That openness is not often found in the competitive atmosphere of academia, says Douglass, now chairman of the Department of Oral Health Policy and Epidemiology at Harvard University’s School of Dental Medicine. He says that when he arrived at Harvard, a senior professor cautioned that when you teach students all you know, you risk competition from them in the future.

“There are people who draw a line around how helpful they are willing to be with other people, but he (Dennis) doesn’t draw that line,” Douglass says. “It must have something to do with his own confidence in his ability to put information together and not be worried for his own goals. He seems to understand

that other people can be successful, and he can help them, and he can be successful, too.”

That philosophical thread runs through his business practices, as well. UNC President Emeritus Bill Friday, who calls Gillings “the great American success story,” notes that the global business leader hires those with strengths he needs to round out his management team.

“He gets good people and turns them loose,” Friday says. “If you are smart enough to pick people smarter than you in their areas of expertise, and give them wings to help them succeed, you will succeed, also.”

While Gillings easily serves as mentor to many, he does not easily name anyone who



pushes him to succeed, in return. It soon becomes apparent that Dennis Gillings pushes himself. And he seems genuinely baffled that any human being would not want to reach his or her potential—it's a given with him.

"I guess it's just a competitive or natural instinct to reach your potential, so when I see some great potential in someone and they are not realizing it, I challenge. That's the way I am," he says.

### A Global Vision for Business

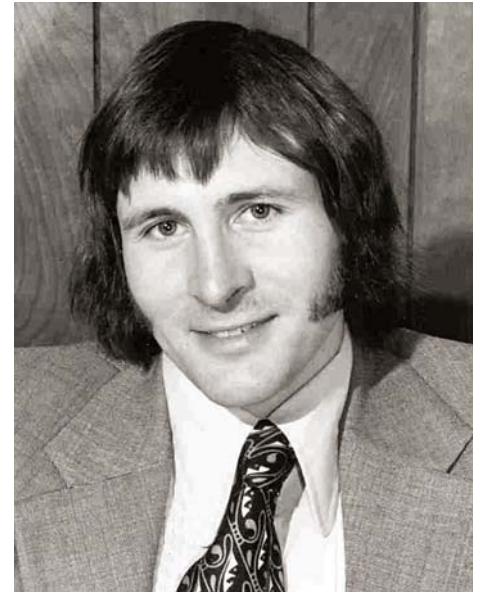
Gillings' early life is not rooted in the University of North Carolina, but his professional life is. Born at the end of World War II, Gillings was educated in the inner city of London before attending the University of Exeter for a bachelor's degree in mathematics. He then headed to the University of Cambridge for a diploma in mathematical statistics (equivalent to a master's degree), and returned to Exeter to teach while working on his doctorate.

ters" skittering about when the lights were turned on at night.

But from this humble space—which Koch and Gillings shared with research assistants—the seeds of Quintiles were sown. It began when Gillings was asked to write an expert report for Hoechst regarding a diabetes drug, and Koch reviewed his work. The two always have had a good rapport, says Douglass, who remembers having lunch with the two assistant biostatistics professors in Chapel Hill's Zoom Zoom Room during his first week on campus as assistant professor of health policy and administration.

"I came home that day and said (to my wife), 'I am not sure, but I think I had lunch today with two geniuses,'" Douglass says. "They had a very high level of ability of communicating with each other conceptually and mathematically, and it clicked like crazy. And look what they went off and did!"

What they did was catapult a consulting business into an organization with astonishing global reach. Koch continued to teach but



Dennis Gillings, 1971

use it as a way to hit an approach to a problem in public health. So that way, it became something really practical."

He also took that approach in the business world, says Dr. Lisa LaVange, who was a vice president in the clinical development area at Quintiles before her current job as professor of biostatistics in the School of Public Health. LaVange earned her PhD in biostatistics from UNC. Although she never had a class with Gillings, she considers herself an "adopted Trailer 39 student."

"He absolutely was a visionary. I don't remember anybody thinking about global meetings like he did," she says. "Seeing what he did in other countries, I became more aware of how everybody interconnected. He is an unbelievable businessman, quite brilliant."

### A meaningful gift

In a letter to School alumni describing why they gave this gift, Dennis and Joan Gillings outlined their vision by inviting alumni and others to "join us in the remarkable journey to transform the way public health solutions are developed and delivered—at home and around the world."

Clearly, the donation is intended to propel the School of Public Health, which already trains some of the best public health students in the country, toward making a difference on a global scale by engaging students,

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*Bill Friday • UNC President Emeritus*

Upon graduating, Gillings and some friends decided to head to Africa via Land Rover for an adventure, but about this time, one of his statistics professors at Exeter, Dr. John Ashford, suggested he think about teaching in the United States. During a conference in Germany, Gillings met Dr. Bernard Greenberg, then chair of Carolina's Department of Biostatistics, who offered him a job at UNC.

Gillings came to UNC in 1971 and began his early teaching career with fellow assistant professor, Dr. Gary Koch, in what was known as "Trailer 39." The stories about the trailer are legendary, including descriptions of "crit-

served on Quintiles' board of directors while the company soared, from operating with a small, part-time staff in 1974 to its current reach of 20,000 employees in 57 countries.

That's in part because Gillings used his classroom abilities to good effect in the board room. He always had a knack for helping students understand their work from a human perspective, says MacMillan, who calls him "far and away, the best professor I had at UNC."

"He had this terrific ability to pick up on your classroom subject and make it real," she says. "For instance, when presenting something that can be dry, like biostatistics, he'd

faculty, government, business leaders and others in collaboration.

Friday agrees that the gift will create widespread, meaningful results.

“This is the greatest opportunity any school of public health has ever had,” he says. “First, it will do things to help prevent people from becoming sick in the first place, and it will stimulate all kinds of research projects.”

The research projects will lead to solutions, a compelling purpose behind the gift.

“We believe that public health holds the answers to many of the world’s greatest challenges—from shortages of safe, clean drinking water, to the growing epidemic of obesity in this country, to worldwide threats from diseases such as SARS and Avian flu, to methods for accelerating the speed of clinical

trials,” the couple wrote. “We wanted to be a part of the solutions to these and other problems.”

Gillings suggests focusing efforts on specific areas rather than taking broad swipes at public health problems.

“In the United States, public health can’t be pushed without good business models, which is what the focus areas give us,” he says. “It’s a change from 50 years ago, when you identified the need and then spent money on it.”

He said he quickly learned that simply spending money on a problem wasn’t enough. For instance, it’s relatively easy to buy and supply vaccines to various regions of the world, but if the distribution system breaks down, the vaccines don’t do any good. Instead, he suggests that his \$50 million gift

be used in a focused and effective way.

That is why the School is establishing competitively selected Gillings Innovation Laboratories (GILs), which will focus on major public health concerns. (See page 29.)

LaVange sees the gift and the Gillings Innovation Labs as something that “can and will have reach, tremendous reach” because they will emphasize health outcomes and will seek solutions to a variety of public health issues, including environmental problems, water shortages and fetal health.

“It’s an opportunity to do research to change the direction of public health,” she says.

For Gillings, it’s all about linking the project to its impact, or the ultimate outcome.

“That is the first step to success, to include a linkage from the project to the impact it’s going to make, to the ultimate outcome or health improvement,” he says.

This approach to problem-solving and pushing for meaningful change is nothing new. Douglass recalls that early on, when Gillings was assigned the task of teaching biostatistics to medical students, he wrote a self-instructional text and gave it to them.

“It was a way of helping them out that would continue beyond the course, and that’s precisely how he thinks,” Douglass says. “He thinks about ways to accomplish something that will continue on. So it’s not just giving a lecture and being done with it, but thinking about what can come of it afterward. And then what can come of the fact after that? What could I do that would be lasting and meaningful?”

The \$50 million given by Gillings and his wife, Joan, surely will be a lasting and meaningful gift, from someone who traces his professional roots to a trailer parked outside the School of Public Health in the early 1970s.

Friday emphasized Gillings’ loyalty to UNC, calling him a living example of someone who realized the American dream and provided opportunity to others in return.

“He drew his strength here, he succeeded, and he has turned back to his roots,” Friday says. “He is a man of exceedingly good will, and this university will be much in his debt for a long time.” ■

— BY KIM GAZELLA



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