



PHOTO BY TOM FULDNER

JOAN GILLINGS: Inspiring others with a “can do, hands-on” attitude

Life has been a wild ride for Joan Gillings, and frankly, she has loved every minute of it. Born in Philadelphia, the daughter of a clothing model and the president of Whitman Chocolate Co., Joan Heckler was reared in Grosse Pointe, Mich.

After her first marriage ended, she moved to Chapel Hill in the early 1970s, believing it would be an ideal place to rear her two young sons.

From 1974 to 1976, she worked on the staff of the UNC Department of Biostatistics. “Even at that time, the UNC School of Public Health was seen as one of the best in the nation,” she says. “There was a lot going on, a lot of excitement.”

It was during those years that she met Dennis Gillings, an up-and-coming faculty member in the department, and their amazing partnership began.

“I think what attracts people to each other is shared values,” she says, “and that’s true for Dennis and me. It’s what has helped us even through rough times. We both have strong principles, we’re ambitious, we want to ‘grab the ring’ and be the best people we can be.

“Maybe the most important trait we have in common is that we’re family-oriented. Even when he was a full professor at UNC and starting Quintiles, we had regular evening meals together,” she recalls.

It was also at the family dining table, Gillings says, that Quintiles began. As her husband received increasing numbers of requests to consult with pharmaceutical companies, Gillings worked at a typewriter in the kitchen helping administer projects and organize reports.

“Our family and the people he worked with believed in Dennis,” Gillings says. “He is a man with a vision who believes passionately in whatever he sets out to do. Along the way, he enjoys what he’s doing.”

Gillings’ direct involvement with Quintiles dwindled when their daughter Susan was born in 1981. To allow herself more flexibili-

ty as a working mother, she obtained a real estate license. She brokered residential and commercial properties in Chapel Hill (including one of the office complexes used by Quintiles) and around the world, including London, England, and Sydney, Australia.

Through the years, the Gillingses have shared a philosophy about “giving back” some of their good fortune. In fact, Dennis Gillings says his wife took the lead in family philanthropy, calling her his “human side.”

“People call us all the time to be on one board or another,” she says. “But I won’t serve unless I can be a contributing member. And given that I stay busy, I can only commit to being active for causes that I value.”

Still, the beneficiaries of Gillings’ philanthropic efforts are many. She values education and, as chair of the Board of Visitors of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNC-W), has worked to create scholarships for deserving students there, particularly minority students, who could not otherwise afford to attend.

“Joan Gillings has made such a difference on our campus,” says UNC-W Chancellor Rosemary DePaolo. “She doesn’t see obstacles; she sees challenges. Joan values innovation and collaboration, and she’s determined to get things done. Her can-do, hands-on attitude is very inspiring.”

And she knows how to make connections. For example, as a member of the Advisory Board for the Center for Marine Science at UNC-W, Gillings and her husband arranged a partnership with the National Oceanography Centre at University of Southampton in England to create and support a program for student and faculty exchanges and research collaborations. (Joan is chair of the Southampton University Development Trust and Dennis is pro-chancellor of Southampton University.)

Dr. Dan Baden, William R. Kenan Distinguished Professor of marine science, and director of the Center for Marine Science at UNC-W, says that Gillings’ “business savvy has been a cornerstone of her work with us. The Southampton endowment is an example

of how Joan’s and Dennis’ insights create new opportunities, new colleagues and innovative training for the next generation of marine scientists.”

An avid reader, Gillings is interested in history and the arts, and has contributed knowledgeably as a board member for the North Carolina Museum of Art, the Wrightsville Beach Museum of History, Wilmington’s Opera House Theatre Company and the UNC-Chapel Hill Morehead Planetarium.

They always had planned a gift to the School, Gillings says, in proportion to the gratitude they felt toward biostatistics chair (and later dean) Bernard Greenberg. “Bernie found Dennis and believed in him. The School gave Dennis the tools to achieve what he wanted, and he succeeded by taking the opportunity that was given.

“We also believe in the mission of the School. In our own lives, we value health—we don’t smoke; we’re active and watch how we eat; we believe in preventive care. We

“Joan values innovation and collaboration, and she’s determined to get things done. Her can-do, hands-on attitude is very inspiring.”

Rosemary DePaolo • UNC-Wilmington Chancellor

She created a fund to support UNC-W’s creative writing program, one of five recognized by *The Atlantic* (July 2007, www.theatlantic.com/doc/200707u/writing-programs) as among the most innovative in the country.

“Like great writers, Joan has a wealth of vision, energy and creativity,” DePaolo says. “She wants to help talented people succeed.”

The Joan H. Gillings Fellowship in Creative Writing is awarded annually to an incoming master of fine arts student at UNC-W. “The gift makes a huge difference in the quality of our program,” says Philip Gerard, chair of the creative writing department. “We don’t have deep pockets of money to award incoming students, so Mrs. Gillings’ gift has a much stronger positive impact here than it might in a program that needed it less. She has always understood and valued what we do here.”

The transformative gift Gillings and her husband pledged to the UNC School of Public Health in February 2007 is one more example—on a larger scale—of supporting a cause in which they passionately believe.

think this awareness about health and ability to be healthy should be available to people in North Carolina and around the world.

“Perhaps most importantly, we’ve been proud of the leadership of Bill Roper and Barbara Rimer. Barbara has done outstanding work; she’s a real go-getter, and we want to do all we can to help her reach the goals she has set for the School.”

Dennis and Joan Gillings’ strong bond, based on shared values and mutual love and respect, has reaped rewards for them as individuals and as a couple. Even with all the busyness—most recently related to the renovation of a historic Chapel Hill house and the wedding of their daughter Susan, now an architect—there is still time to honor each other.

Gillings smiles when she describes a recent anniversary, on which she received 30 roses, one for every year of their marriage. That has happened every year without fail, she says, since she received a single rose on their first anniversary.

“I told you he’s a passionate man,” she winks. ■

— BY LINDA KASTLEMAN