Dr. Jonathan Fielding tells his staff that when it comes to improving the health of the 10 million people living in the nation’s most populous county, impatience is a virtue.

“There’s always so much more to do that I never feel we’re doing enough,” says the founding director of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, who has served more than three decades on the faculty of the UCLA Jonathan and Karin Fielding School of Public Health – a school that was renamed in March in recognition of a $50 million gift from the public health icon and his wife (see page 4). “We still have such an enormous preventable burden of disease and injury that it’s important not to be satisfied – always to look at what more needs to be done rather than focusing on our accomplishments.”

Stipulating that the job is never complete, Fielding’s accomplishments are considerable. Under his leadership, L.A. County’s public health department has earned a reputation for innovative and proactive initiatives, including the first-of-its-kind A-B-C restaurant grading program; one of the nation’s most ambitious chronic disease and injury prevention programs; and a state-of-the-art emergency preparedness and readiness program.

Fielding is also helping to shape the state and national public health agenda. He is a founding member of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force and chair of the U.S. Community Preventive Services Task Force, a national group of experts who assess and recommend policies to improve population health. He is immediate past chair of the Partnership for Prevention and the U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary’s Advisory Committee on the 2020 Health Objectives for the Nation. In 2011, President Obama appointed Fielding to the Advisory Group on Prevention, Health Promotion, and Integrative and Public Health, which advises on intersectoral policy opportunities to improve health. Fielding is vice chair of the Los Angeles First Five Commission, which grants more than $100 million a year to improve the health and development of children ages 0-5.

And despite his ample local, state and national responsibilities, Fielding has remained an active member of the school’s faculty – teaching a course on the determinants of health in populations, providing opportunities...
for students to gain hands-on practice experience at
the county Department of Public Health, and collabora-
ting with other faculty members on research aiming
to more precisely forecast the long-term public health
impact of changes in population characteristics and
adoption of new policies, including those in non-
health sectors. Fielding, with colleagues at the school,
has been a leading voice in a national movement
known as Health in All Policies, which argues that
decisions made in transportation, agriculture, energy,
education and other sectors have significant public
health effects that should be considered.

Born and raised in Westchester County, NY, Fielding
was drawn to medicine at an early age, but also
harbored ambitions of making a broader impact than
would be possible seeing one patient at a time. In
high school he was selected to spend a day shadow-
ing the Westchester County public health director.
The experience made a lasting impression. “We were
talking about problems of a whole community,”
Fielding recalls. “It was very different from how I was
used to thinking about medicine.”

Fielding went to Harvard Medical School and
intended to go into pediatrics, which appealed to
him for its focus on prevention and family-centered
care. But during his pediatric training he was struck
by how little he could do for many of his patients
in clinical practice. “I saw problems of poverty and
families that couldn’t afford enough food,” he says.
“I saw terrible mental health problems that weren’t
going attention. I saw lack of stimulation and neg-
lect. And there was precious little I could do to
solve these problems on an individual level.”

While completing his pediatric residency, Fielding
went back to Harvard for his M.P.H. (he later added
an M.B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania’s
Wharton School of Business Administration). He was
already enticed by the opportunities to make a dif-
fERENCE in the public health profession when he was
hired as medical director for the U.S. Department of
Labor’s Job Corps program. In that role, Fielding was
responsible for the health of approximately 50,000
young people per year who came through the program
for the chance to earn a G.E.D. and learn a trade.

“These were mostly high school dropouts who
came from very difficult, often desperate circum-
stances,” he says. “You could see the effects of poverty
and other social forces on their life trajectory, and
the importance of prevention. It made me think hard
about what I wanted to do, and it just seemed logical
that if I wanted to really make a difference at a broad
level, I should go in the direction of public health.”

In 1974, when Fielding was 32, Massachusetts
Gov. Michael Dukakis appointed him public health
commissioner. Fielding wasted no time taking bold
action by launching the nation’s first statewide
tobacco control program. He was also well ahead of
the curve in emphasizing prevention strategies such
as nutrition, physical activity and stress reduction to
combat chronic diseases, an emerging public health
concern that had yet to receive significant attention.

When Dukakis lost his reelection bid in 1978,
Fielding found himself looking for new work. He
had a kindred spirit at UCLA in Dr. Lester Breslow,
thен-dean of the School of Public Health. “We had
the same notions about public health,” Fielding says,
“and he became a great mentor to me.” Breslow had
previously invited Fielding to teach at the school as
a visiting faculty member; now he was offering him
a full-time position as professor of public health and
pediatrics, and co-director of a new Center for Health
Enhancement Education and Research. Although
Fielding received many offers for jobs on the East
Coast, he was intrigued by the UCLA offer. “They
were taking a chance on me – I’d never been an
academic before,” he says. “It sounded like an exciting
opportunity to make a difference, so I decided to
take a chance too.”

In 1998, Fielding was presented with another oppor-
tunity to make a difference. He was asked to work
with Breslow and other faculty colleagues in assessing
and then drawing up a plan to revitalize public health
in the county. The plan was embraced by the county
board of supervisors, and when it passed Fielding
was asked to join the department as the public health
officer. In 2006, the supervisors agreed to form a
separate Department of Public Health, a move
Fielding had strongly advocated. “We had been part
of a department that had a different mission,”
Fielding explains. “That made it very difficult to get
the resources or the attention that I thought public
health deserved.”
The Fielding-led department has garnered attention and widespread praise for many of its programs, starting with the restaurant-grading system, which improved hygiene and significantly reduced the frequency of severe food-borne illness. Even before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the department moved to develop aggressive preparedness programs – now widely emulated – to protect against natural emergencies such as pandemics, as well as the threat of bioterrorism. The department’s chronic disease control program has flourished under Fielding, forging partnerships with community-based organizations to implement cutting-edge initiatives in nutrition, physical activity and tobacco prevention, while working with city governments to advance policies on everything from anti-smoking ordinances to developments that promote walking and bicycling.

While tending to the health of the county’s 10 million residents, Fielding has continued to stay engaged as a faculty member at the school. He says the relationship – on which he placed an exclamation point with the naming gift this year – contributes to ensuring that the school’s faculty remains grounded in the everyday realities of public health practice, while providing valuable work experiences for students during their education. But Fielding points out that the close ties are equally vital to the department. “We need the expertise of the school’s faculty, and can significantly benefit from the help of its students,” Fielding says. “In addition, it’s important to be close to the cutting-edge research that takes place in the academic environment, and to be able to collaborate with faculty in research and evaluation around the pressing public health problems we face.”

His many honors include elected membership in the Institute of Medicine; the Sedgwick Memorial Medal for contributions to the public health field and the Milton and Ruth Roemer Award for achievements in local public health, both from the American Public Health Association; and, in 2009, the UCLA Medal, the highest honor conferred by the university. But Fielding isn’t content to reflect on his accomplishments. There’s always so much more to do. “We have huge disparities in health,” he laments. “When an African American male in Los Angeles County lives on average 18 years less than an Asian-Pacific Islander female, that tells you there’s a lot of work to be done. And that’s just one example.”

Fielding remains as sold as ever on the power of public health in addressing such concerns. One of his goals is to help others understand how much there is to do – and how much public health can contribute with sufficient funding.

“We haven’t done as good a job as we need to in educating both the public and policy-makers on why core public health has to be part of a national strategy,” Fielding says. “People need to understand what public health is and what it does for them. If they understand that very small investments can yield very large returns, we will gain much more support.”

“You could see the effects of poverty and other social forces on their life trajectory, and the importance of prevention. It just seemed logical that if I wanted to really make a difference at a broad level, I should go in the direction of public health.”