These days, the last place anyone would expect to get good news is at a gas pump. But for Holden Thorp, it presented the opportunity of a lifetime.

Several weeks ago, on his way back from Greensboro with UNC President Erskine Bowles, that is exactly where Thorp, Kenan Professor of Chemistry and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, learned that he would be Carolina’s next chancellor. It happened after the two men met with Jim Phillips, chair of the UNC Board of Governors (BOG), about Thorp’s candidacy.

That meeting with Phillips was one of many interviews Thorp had faced over the previous seven months. It would also prove to be the last.

As Thorp recalled, “President Bowles got out and put the nozzle in the tank. Then he leaned back into the car and said, ‘I know this probably isn’t the place where you thought you’d get the most important job offer of your life, but I’d like you to be the chancellor at Chapel Hill.’”

Of course, Bowles already knew what Thorp’s answer would be, and maybe that was why Thorp responded, “Erskine, I’m never going to forget the Exxon on Wendover Avenue.”

Thorp recounted the story last Thursday moments after the Board of Governors voted unanimously to make him the University’s 10th chancellor. “It’s a good thing I didn’t run inside to get some Nabs,” Thorp added.

The selection of H. Holden Thorp as chancellor, many people believe, is good news for Carolina. And no one believes it more than Bowles, who told BOG members he had no doubt that Thorp was the right leader for Carolina today and tomorrow.

“He personifies what Carolina is all about. He is a remarkable teacher, a brilliant scientist, a successful inventor and entrepreneur, and a respected administrator. His passion — which you can absolutely feel — for the liberal arts, for creativity and the joy of discovery are absolutely contagious and I am caught with the disease.”

Bowles also noted that Thorp was about as true-blue a Tar Heel as they come. Thorp admitted as much in his acceptance speech, with a nod to his late father, Herb Thorp, also an alumnus, who used to tuck him into bed at night to the tune of “Hark the Sound.”

That may be why, as a senior at Terry Sanford High School in Fayetteville, Thorp applied only to Carolina. “It sounds crazy now, but I only sent in one college application,” he said. “Thank goodness I was accepted.”

The opportunity to attend a world-class research university like Carolina and to work in its chemistry labs with some of the University’s best faculty, Thorp said, inspired him to be a college professor and instilled in him the hope that he would attain his dream job: to become the chair of the chemistry department here.

It was a goal Thorp achieved 11 years after joining the faculty as an assistant professor (see the timeline on page 3).

“Now you have given me the opportunity to serve my University and my state in a way I never dreamed,” he said. “I tried not to think about it. I tried not to think about what it would be like to stand before you, but I did. And let me tell you, it’s even better than I ever thought it would be.”
“He personifies what Carolina is all about. He is a remarkable teacher, a brilliant scientist, a successful inventor and entrepreneur, and a respected administrator.”

— Erskine Bowles, UNC President

One of our own from page 1

The right chemistry

Bowles said Thorp fully understood and appreciated the deep-rooted connection between Carolina and the people of North Carolina.

UNC President Emeritus William Friday, who was in attendance for the announcement, said he saw many of those same qualities in Thorp.

“His experience here over a decade or so, I think, perfectly qualifies him,” Friday said. “I know him. I know him to be a real leader and I have great confidence in what he will do. He follows in the tradition of Aycock and Fordham and Taylor.

“What I like about him is I know his sense of purpose, I know his commitment and dedication. He’s the kind of person who will be totally consumed by the work, in the best sense. Other than his family, the work will be his life.”

But Friday also noted one other asset: Thorp’s ability to hit the ground running, as only someone from within would have, because of the trust and respect already earned.

“He already works with the faculty, and that being so, I think we’re going to see great things happen because he and President Bowles have a marvelous chemistry. They relate to each other very wonderfully. He’s five years ahead right now.”

Employee Forum Chair Ernie Patterson, who was on the search committee, said Thorp would come to the job already understanding the critical role of staff as well as faculty and students because of the various roles he has filled.

Patterson said he had met Thorp a number of times and respected him greatly. “I certainly believe he will work with the staff to address some of the serious issues that are facing this University.”

Patterson acknowledged there were unavoidable pluses and minuses to selecting a candidate from within the University. “In the long run, the positive side of knowing the University, of having the experience with the students, faculty and staff, and having experience with the business side of the University from running a department and the College of Arts and Sciences, will outweigh the negative side of being an insider. I believe the positives with Holden simply were enormous.”

Student Body President J.J. Raynor, who replaced the late Eve Carson on the search committee, said she also liked the idea of hiring from the inside.

“I’m just really excited about him,” Raynor said. “Holden already knows the Carolina traditions and a lot about our values and the way we do things here. From a student’s perspective, I’m excited because we don’t have to teach him to be a Tar Heel. We just have to show him how students live and what we care about.”

One long-held Carolina tradition is giving students a place at the table when key decisions are being made, Raynor said. As dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, “He is already used to doing that and I’ve seen him doing it, and I have complete confidence that he will seek student input,” she said.

Raynor said she also liked the fact that Thorp is so young. “We’re starting to see a transition between the older generation of faculty and the younger generation coming in, and I see him as a bridge between those two generations,” she said. “His focus on entrepreneurship and being able to tie academic output to enterprise is really cool.”

Thorp holds 19 issued or pending U.S. patents. Some of the technologies he has invented, including highly miniaturized DNA chips, are being used to identify carriers of the gene for cystic fibrosis and to develop new treatments for sickle cell disease and iron overload. His DNA chip technology led to his being named one of the top innovators of 2001 by Forbes magazine. He also co-founded a company dedicated to finding new drugs and enzymes with metallic properties.

At 43, Thorp is the third youngest person to lead Carolina since William Aycock (41), who became chancellor in 1957, and Robert House (42), who became dean of administration in 1934 and chancellor in 1945.
Holden Thorp’s ‘meteoric rise’ to chancellor

1986  ■  Received a bachelor of science degree with highest honors in chemistry from Carolina.
1989  ■  Earned a doctorate in chemistry from the California Institute of Technology.
■  Was a postdoctoral associate at Yale University.
1991  ■  Received National Science Foundation’s Presidential Young Investigator Award.
■  Appointed assistant professor of chemistry at N.C. State University.
■  Received the Lucile Packard Fellowship in Science and Engineering.
1993  ■  Returned to Carolina as assistant professor of chemistry.
1995  ■  Received the Camille Dreyfus Teacher-Scholar Award.
1996  ■  Awarded Ruth and Philip Hettleman Prize for Artistic and Scholarly Achievement.
■  Received the Alfred P. Sloan Fellowship.
1998  ■  Won Tanner Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching.
1999  ■  Promoted to professor.
2001  ■  Appointed director of the Morehead Planetarium and Science Center.
■  Recognized as one of the Top Innovators of 2001 by Fortune Small Business magazine for his DNA chip technology.
2002  ■  Named an honorary member of the Order of the Golden Fleece, UNC’s oldest honorary society.
■  Named Distinguished Young Alumnus by General Alumni Association.
■  Served as faculty director of an effort that has produced $17 million in gifts and pledges to support the first phase of the Carolina Physical Science Complex, the largest construction project in the University’s history.
2005  ■  Appointed Kenan Professor of Chemistry and chair of the nationally recognized Department of Chemistry.
■  Co-founded Viamet Pharmaceuticals Inc., a biotechnology company targeting metalloenzymes in the fields of infectious disease, inflammation and oncology.
2007  ■  Appointed dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the University’s largest academic unit with more than 14,000 undergraduates and 2,500 graduate students.
2008  ■  Elected Carolina’s 10th chancellor.

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE
Search committee finds Thorp uniquely qualified to lead Carolina, today and tomorrow

The question was perhaps inevitable.
When asked what it felt like to rise so far so fast, 43-year-old Holden Thorp gave a deadpan response: “Well, I seem to be having a problem holding down a job.”

In a little more than a decade, Thorp moved from being an assistant professor to tenured faculty member and chair of the chemistry department. Along the way, he was tasked with invigorating and redefining the Morehead Planetarium and Science Center, and a little more than a year ago, he became dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the University’s largest academic unit, after a national search.

Then, Thorp said in all sincerity, “It’s a little intoxicating to rise this fast, but it is also exciting to have an ample runway to really think about what I might be able to accomplish with the University.”

During a reception at Gerrard Hall later in the afternoon, Thorp recounted the path that led to the runway. In 2001, he was in a car with Chancellor James Moeser and Matt Kupec, vice chancellor for advancement, for an alumni event in Thorp’s hometown of Fayetteville.

“On the way there, James told me that he wanted to help the Morehead Planetarium and that he hoped I would help him figure out how to do that. I didn’t know the first thing about astronomy. But of course, I said yes.”

The lesson, Thorp said, was, “If the boss takes you on a trip and asks you to do something, you should do it.”

During the next four years, Thorp directed a revitalization of the Morehead Planetarium and Science Center. Attendance increased by 40 percent as the planetarium expanded its traditional focus to encompass new areas of science education.

In 2005, Thorp was appointed chemistry chair, and two years later was selected through a national search to become dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. In just one year as dean, Thorp secured 27 endowed professorships, including 13 that will allow for a dramatic expansion of the college’s Honors Program.

During that period, the College raised more than $57 million for the Arts and Sciences Foundation — an achievement not lost on UNC President Erskine Bowles when Thorp’s name was forwarded to him for consideration.

Bowles said people told him this respected scientist truly liked asking for funds. “When I asked him about it, he said, ‘Erskine, it’s true. It’s easy to ask for money for a place you believe in and love.’”

That trait was noted by the Chancellor’s Search Committee as well.

Nelson Schwab III, immediate past chair of the University Board of Trustees who led the committee, told Board of Governors members that the national search for Carolina’s next chancellor was led by Bill Funk, a consultant who heads the Dallas-based R. William Funk and Associates.

The list of applicants or nominees eventually exceeded 100, with candidates drawn from 32 states and the District of Columbia. Women and minorities constituted 31 percent of the pool, Schwab said.

The committee interviewed 20 applicants in closed sessions, which were followed by in-depth discussions of each individual’s qualifications. In March, the committee brought six additional candidates, including two African-American males and two white females, to Chapel Hill.

Thorp was one of three internal candidates invited to interview before the full committee, and on March 28, his was one of four names the committee forwarded for approval to the University Board of Trustees. The next day, the trustees approved sending that list of four finalists to Bowles.

In recouping the process to the Board of Governors, Schwab said, “It should be noted that one candidate had the unanimous support of the committee and I’m pleased to see him in the audience here today.”

Both during his introduction to the Board of Governors and at the campus reception, Thorp expressed his deep appreciation and admiration for Moeser, who he said had been an invaluable mentor to him, as were others at the University.

Before he introduced Thorp, Bowles expressed his appreciation for Moeser’s productive, positive leadership the past eight years.

“He has accomplished what every successful CEO dreams of when they take a job and that is, he had made his institution, he has made Carolina stronger than it was when he found it and he has made it better in every single way,” Bowles said.
something in the water

In his speech, Bowles joked that there must be something in the water in the chemistry department at Carolina since it has produced two deans, one vice chancellor, two provosts, one chair of the faculty, one UNC system vice president and with Thorp, one chancellor.

But Joe Templeton, chair of the faculty and Francis Preston Venable Professor of Chemistry, might say that the chemistry department has produced an enduring bond of friendship among colleagues. Thorp referred to his admiration of, and friendship with, Templeton when he described him as “the finest human being I know” and one reason Thorp aspired to be chair of the department.

But it was that friendship, Templeton said, that gave him cause to fret. As a member of the search committee, he wondered if he could see his friend objectively, and whether the qualities he knew Thorp possessed would be qualities that others saw in him as well. He did not need to worry.

Of the list of qualities and characteristics that Bowles gave the search committee, Templeton said, “You can go down that list and check them off, whether you are a friend of Holden’s or not. I’m delighted he has been chosen.”

‘Soul of an artist’

Chancellor James Moeser had said that the next chancellor should be a scientist. When asked whether he agreed, Thorp joked that he had to agree if he wanted the job.

His one-year tenure as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, he said, reinforced his understanding that the humanities are no less valuable to a great public research university than the hard sciences are.

As a scientist, however, Thorp said he can weigh decisions without being overwhelmed by some of the big numbers associated with the University’s expanding research enterprise.

“The costs of those things are wildly different, but their importance is not wildly different,” Thorp said.

Joy Kasson, chair of the American studies department, is not worried about Thorp keeping those values in balance. She described Thorp as “a scientist with the soul of an artist.”

In fact, he is an artist, a keyboardist who plays with colleagues Steve Alred, executive associate provost, and Terry Rhodes, professor of music, in a Chapel Hill jazz band called Equinox.

“I think an important thing about Holden is that he is curious and open-minded,” Kasson said. “He has said that he wants to figure out what excellence means in the humanities. He knows what it’s like in science, but he is eager to know more about the workings of other fields.”

Perhaps no one has seen as many sides to Thorp as Bobbi Owen, who for the past year has served with Thorp as senior associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Owen first met him in 1976 when both Thorp and his brother, Clay, were around as she designed costumes for “The Highland Call,” a production at the Cumberland County Auditorium that their mother, Bo, directed as part of the state’s bicentennial celebration.

But what impresses Owen most is not Thorp’s acting ability, but his gift for solving problems. “He has enormous capacity and is the definition of the phrase ‘quick study.’ I’m a big fan.”

William Friday, right, president emeritus of the University of North Carolina, congratulates Holden Thorp.

John Akin, chair of the economics department, said he has known Thorp for many years as a fellow department chair, a fellow participant in the Carolina Entrepreneurship Initiative and as a friend.

“He is probably the most honest, moral and straight-to-the-point person I have ever known,” Akin said. “The first thing you notice about Holden is that there is absolutely no pretense to the man.

Akin said Thorp is also a man of great passion — for his work, his family, his students and teaching, and his research.

“This University community will be amazed at how much Holden loves UNC and at how committed he is to having UNC make a difference in the lives of people.”

Maurice Brookhart, a chemistry professor who has been Thorp’s office mate for years, described Thorp as someone who brightens everyone’s day.

“I know Holden as a creative, articulate, deep-thinking scientist with an entrepreneurial spirit, as a colleague dedicated to educating graduate and undergraduate students and as a friend ready to talk science, politics, literature, theater, rock groups or hoops, or share a laugh recounting a Monty Python episode,” Brookhart said.

“I am confident the University will be in excellent hands and that Holden’s vision, intellect, dedication, fairness and good humor will take the University to new levels of excellence in research, education and service.”

For more about Carolina’s Chancellor-Elect, including Thorp’s biography and observations, refer to www.unc.edu/chan/search/index.php.