The gears started turning – as they often do in West Texas – over football. Joe Canon and Larry Gill weren’t talking touchdowns; where other fans might spend a game hashing out pass completions and play calling, the two men had their minds on an entirely different subject: the nation’s growing pharmacist shortage.

Aware that the deficiency is an increasing concern in West Texas and of Abilene’s role as a regional medical hub, Canon and Gill, both with the Dodge Jones Foundation, had begun exploring the idea of establishing a new pharmacy school in their community. Given the number of off-campus programs the Texas Tech University System had already established in Abilene, the men discussed approaching the Health Sciences Center with the concept.

The opportunity presented itself during a 2004 Red Raiders game, where Gill was watching with Norm Archibald, who is now Abilene’s mayor. They met former TTUHSC President M. Roy Wilson, M.D., M.S., who suggested they present their idea to School of Pharmacy Dean Arthur A. Nelson Jr., Ph.D. Nelson, Gill recalls, handed them a business card and suggested they set up a meeting.

“He took the bull by the horns and said, ‘Let’s make this work,’” says Gill, vice president and grants administrator for the Dodge Jones Foundation. “Once Dr. Nelson gets an idea, he’s very tenacious.”

Now, as the SOP celebrates the 10th anniversary since successfully opening the nation’s first public pharmacy school in 50 years, a group of Big Country benefactors have amassed more than $13 million to help the school expand its pharmacy education even further.

The funds will subsidize the start-up of a 40,000 square-foot school on the Hendrick Health System campus in Abilene. The first 40 students should begin in August 2007 and a projected 160 students will fill classrooms within three years after that, making

by Cory Chandler
a contribution to filling the shortfall of pharmacists in the United States.

By some measures, approximately 7 percent of U.S. pharmacist vacancies already go unfilled; the Pharmacy Manpower Project predicts that the country will be short some 157,000 pharmacists by 2020.

TTUHSC made its first inroads into this shortage in 1996, when it began offering Doctor of Pharmacy degrees through the School of Pharmacy at Amarillo. The school has expanded the third and fourth years of its program into Lubbock and the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Now, lured by the promise of cutting-edge technology, small classes and nearly 200 scholarship opportunities, more than 350 students and residents are training to eventually fill pharmacy jobs in West Texas and elsewhere.

“We have been a major force in helping relieve the pharmacist shortage in northern West Texas by training local people and attracting students from other regions of the state to stay in West Texas once they graduate,” Nelson says. This is also true in the Metroplex, where Nelson says 75 percent of the school’s graduates remain in the area.

“We have always been the smallest of the four pharmacy schools in Texas,” he says, “but our graduates practice in-state at a very high rate.”

Nelson expects the expansion into Abilene will further alleviate the shortage of pharmacists in West Texas, allowing Big Country students to complete all four years of the program in Abilene while remaining closer to home. The projected 40 graduates per year by 2011 will fill openings left by retiring practitioners and take new jobs created by the medical demands of a graying population.

Abilene itself will benefit from the school, Mayor Archibald says, pointing out that cities strive for gains in economic development, health care and higher education.

“Every city wants these things,” he says. “We are answering them all with this new facility.”

Land for the new school has been donated by Hendrick Health System and funding has been raised by the City of Abilene, the Development Corporation of Abilene, Sears Methodist Retirement Centers, the Dodge Jones Foundation, the Dian Graves Owen Foundation, Greathouse Foundation and the Shelton Family Foundation.

While their parents visit, the girls look for prizes with Raieane Trudeau, a fourth-year student. From left, Melissa Lason and Carolyn Lason, daughters of Scott Lason, CVS manager, and Hannah Jaramillo, daughter of Jeannie Jaramillo ('01).