

# Love Will Keep Us Together

■ LOU ELLEN HORWITZ, MA

Urgent care people are a competitive bunch, but that wasn't always the case. In the very early days of urgent care it was quite different. Everyone was so new at this that no one knew anything, so everyone shared everything. "Education" in those days meant that someone shared a thing they had tried that had worked. No one worried about competing with each other because there weren't enough of us yet to get in each other's way.

Over the next decade, as urgent cares multiplied across the land and we became the private equity flavor of the month (for 120+ months and counting), that trust and sharing slowly eroded.

It was exciting to be part of that growth, but as we all grew up there was also a sense of loss. We lost some of our innocence, our love of a good time, and our willingness to share our Secret Sauce recipes.

After a few years I think we grew to realize there isn't actually such a thing as Secret Sauce. We came to understand that we each continued to struggle with the same things as our peers, and that our industry as a whole could benefit from collaborative problem-solving—but we didn't know how to do that anymore. We didn't know how to find our way back to each other.

Coronavirus took care of that, in spades. Once again, we knew nothing. Once again, we were the underdogs of the healthcare industry. Once again, you needed each other, and once again you came through for each other, also in spades. By mid-January you were even vaccinating each other's teams for nothing, because no one else remembered we were out here. You found your way back to each other.

If you were part of the COVID-19 Listserv, you had a front-row seat to the outpouring of confusion, frustration, experimentation, solutions, and connections that were reforged as all of urgent care navigated through the continual uncertainties. Even if you weren't on the Listserv, you've lived it every day—urgent care leaders coming together across towns, counties, states,

regions, and the nation as we've fought to get our contributions and needs acknowledged, our questions answered, and our voices heard. We're still fighting, but we are fighting TOGETHER—as we should be.

Of course, we're still a competitive bunch, and eventually we're going to get COVID-19 managed...so then what? Do you really want to return to the manners we devolved into over the past decade—or can we grow into our next phase in a better way? Competition is here to stay—from within and without—and demanding investors are here to stay. Urgent care's outstanding responsiveness to COVID-19 has only *increased* our value.

I believe the only way urgent care can meet its true potential is for us to come back together, re-fertilize our entrepreneurial roots, and challenge ourselves as an industry to let go of our fears about the future. If we can do that, we can be free enough to return to a place of true leadership in how healthcare should be delivered.

It's scary in the vanguard, but I know that all of you belong there. UCA belongs there. The vanguard is the place for the brave, the creative, and the determined. The disrupters, the independents, and the mavericks who have nonetheless chosen to be up front *together*. Know what else is important for the vanguard? Trust in your fellow mavericks. Trust that they won't turn on you, or turn and run. Trust that even though you are making new friends, forming new partnerships, bringing in new investors, and trying new opportunities...underneath you all believe in the same thing. You all believe in urgent care.

For those of us that love it, there's a part of us that longs for the day everyone else figures out how great it is. We will sit contentedly (perhaps a *bit* smugly) amongst our fellow mavericks witnessing it all click into place. Watching patients finally get the right care at the right time in the right place for the right price. Reading news stories marveling at urgent care providers keeping nonemergencies out of the emergency room. Hearing payers finally understand how we help them *and* their customers.

I know that day will come. I know it because I have the privilege of knowing you. I know it because I have seen, once again, what we can do together. ■



**Lou Ellen Horwitz, MA** is the chief executive officer of the Urgent Care Association.