



BY WILLIAM G. WILKOFF, M.D.

## LETTERS FROM MAINE

# Who Should Be the Face of Pediatrics?

Even if you are just a casual fan of professional football, you may have noticed this past season, on the back of every player's helmet, the letters "GU" and the number "63" in a dark circle. This commemorated Gene Upshaw, the long-time president of the National Football League Players Association, who died in August. Upshaw, a former NFL player himself, was a man of imposing stature and appearance. His efforts as an advocate for the players were so effective that it is not surprising that he was remembered with an unprecedented gesture.

During one of the numerous and annoying commercial breaks during the Super Bowl, I was on my way to the refrigerator when I had an epiphany of sorts: "Pediatrics needs a Gene Upshaw."

Whenever sports fans saw Gene Upshaw on TV or in the newspaper, they knew he was there to represent the interests of professional football players. Whether the issue was salaries, drug testing, or safe playing conditions, he was their advocate and a darn good one. He was not just the voice but the face of professional football players.

Pediatricians' numbers are far greater and our mission is far more worthy, but we don't have a face—at least one that is recognizable on the national stage. From the standpoint of image, we are really a grassroots organization. We are the faces of pediatrics in our own communities. We usually live in the towns that we serve, and when we show up at meetings or on local TV, everyone knows that we are representing the interests of children.

The American Academy of Pediatrics can and will help us become more effective spokespersons by providing training sessions and coaching. From time to time, the AAP taps some of us to appear in the national media, but these are cameo appearances. We may recognize some of our brothers and sisters when we see them on the "Today Show," but they will fade back into the obscurity of their day jobs and not become household words.

Our governance structure doesn't foster a lasting image. Our academy presidents serve a year of apprenticeship and then a year on the job before they exit the national stage. We do have a Washington office that works extremely hard to keep pediatric issues on the front burners of many legislators and federal administrators, but I suspect that our lobbying could be much more effective if pediatrics had a national face like Gene Upshaw's.

When Jesse Jackson appears at an event, he doesn't even have to say a word. I know he doesn't speak for all African Americans, but when I see his face I ask myself, "How is this situation going to affect people of color?" Wouldn't it be great if we could have a person whose appearance would say, "Think of the children!"

Where can we find someone like that?

Does anyone like that even exist? Benjamin Spock certainly became a household word. T. Berry Brazelton's books and personal appearances have made him a trusted voice, but I think even he would admit that his age is a disadvantage. There are other prominent pediatricians, but most have special interests and may not be willing to moderate their positions so that they could speak for almost all of us.

Does our face have to belong to a pediatrician? Bob Keeshan—who was TV's Captain Kangaroo—would have been an excellent candidate, but sadly he is gone. Other celebrities have stepped forward to advocate for specific changes, but they all have their own careers and agendas.

So, I am at a bit of a loss. But we have serious national issues that need our voice and a recognizable face to go with it.

Should the president of the AAP serve a longer term? Should we hire a PR firm to do a search for us? Until we find someone, each of us will have to be the Gene Upshaw in our own hometown. ■

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