At the American Organization for Nursing Leadership’s (AONL) 2022 annual conference, former AONL Board Member David Marshall, DNP, JD, RN, FAAN, FAONL, senior vice president and chief nursing executive at Cedars-Sinai, Los Angeles., interviewed AONL’s Immediate Past President Mary Ann Fuchs, DNP, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN, who helmed the organization during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this edited interview, she discusses the actions she took as AONL president and as system chief nursing executive at Duke University Health System, Durham, North Carolina, during that tumultuous time.

DM: Thought leadership has been described as crystallizing your knowledge in a way that you can impart it to others. You led AONL during one of the most curious times in its history. Describe that experience for us, and tell us what you learned.

MAF: I remember the day that the pandemic was called officially. And I remember in the next several hours, [AONL CEO] Robyn Begley and I on the phone because we had our big conference in March coming up. We were supposed to be going to Nashville for AONL 2020, celebrating, doing all the great things we do at the annual conference. The first priority was keeping people safe. And what we knew at the time was that in order to keep people safe, we could not be present with one another. And we had to take the knowledge that was already there, like we do every day in our practice, and apply it. Here’s the AONL president and the CEO canceling the conference. Kind of awkward, right? And then we had to start thinking about how were we going to navigate through this. Was this pandemic going to be a couple months? Was it really a pandemic? We didn’t even know. But we operate with uncertainty] every day as leaders.

DM: How did AONL operations change?

MAF: We had to think about how you get the job done when the circumstances change. We didn’t just have a conference, we had all of the work of AONL. We also had all of the work that the board needed to continue to do in order to make our organization effective. And so we switched to meeting virtually. The ability to be flexible and adapt during those times was extremely, extremely important. And I thank God that we had technology to help us to do that.

Also at our organizations, we had to rethink how we did our work. But also during this time, we had incredible opportunities with our teams, because all of our teams really stepped up to do work differently. That happened with our board, and that happened with the staff of AONL. During this time, we did incredible things. We had 2 virtual annual conferences and completed a study to find out nurse leaders’ challenges and their needs. We continued fellowships, they just became virtual. We had to learn how to interact and accomplish our work in a different way. [Our successes] should not be a surprise to us because nurses are the best innovators in whatever situation there is, it was just a new set of circumstances.

DM: You also volunteered for the American Hospital Association at this time. Can you talk about that experience?

MAF: The American Hospital Association (AHA) needed to provide resources and inform hospitals on what to do, how to navigate through this pandemic. So I served on a national task force. And we drafted the tools, the materials, the systems, and processes for people to be able to use, whether it was infection
As leaders, we have to remain energetic. "I derive my energy from the people I work with and that I serve. And every single day, our leaders stepped in and did what they needed to do. They were flexible, accommodating, built new things, did whatever it took to help us get through this pandemic. Because when helping others, we can do anything. And as nurses, we know we can do anything."

Now, was I exhausted? Oh my gosh, was I exhausted! But when the core of what you do is keeping people safe, you have to keep going. You need to do what it takes to keep your patients safe, their families safe, and your team safe. And if you don’t keep your team safe and address their basic needs, you won’t keep others safe.

Early in the pandemic, we were changing infection control practices nearly every day. This was a great time to provide stretch assignments, to delegate different types of things to staff who wanted a new opportunity, who wanted to learn something new. One of our nurse leaders is an infection preventionist by training. We had no system-level infection prevention in our health system. Well, guess who worked on that? And she stepped into a much bigger, broader role because we had the opportunity, and she wanted to do it. [Creation of this role] preserved others’ energy because they didn’t have to worry about that. How do you help others grow? How do you use their talents?

**DM:** During that time, how did you recharge yourself when you were away from the office?

**MAF:** One of the things I had to do in order to maintain my [sanity] was to go home every day and interact with my dogs. I would take them for a walk and play with them. That made me feel refreshed. I hope every each and every one of you figured out how to do that for yourselves.

**DM:** You have talked about never dreaming of being an organization’s president. You served as a board member and then president, where does that passion come from?

**MAF:** In considering this question, I just thought, “Why did I want to become a nurse?” Because that’s really, for me, what it’s about. I’m a nurse, and nurses can do anything. We have so many opportunities, and there are so many needs. It can be a challenge for us, but it’s also a great opportunity. And I decided when I was younger to become a nurse, because it was a profession where people could help one another. I got that from my parents. As I grew up, my parents were always helping other people. My mother was engaged in all different types of community activities. My father was a volunteer fireman and served as an EMT. For years, I watched him run out of the house at all hours to put out fires, to rescue people, to help them in different ways. What could I do to help people? And there was no better decision than to become a nurse. That’s where my passion comes from.

But there’s a bigger, broader world outside our daily work. In order for us to really build our profession and create what our profession needs, you’ve got to step outside. You step outside to your local or regional organizations to see how you can serve. I’m an oncology nurse by training. So all my initial passion outside of work was in oncology. And then when I became a chief nurse, I thought about different ways that I could serve, and that’s where my national focus came from.

**DM:** What’s your advice about improving our profession?

**MAF:** How do we each continue to use our skills to support our profession? We also need to be inclusive. Having the broader, diverse opinion in the room helps us to be much more successful, making sure that we engage others in a very, very broad way. So the decision-making can’t be top down. Decision-making has to be bottom up with some leaders and some...
vision. And you need to recognize that you can’t do it alone. It takes a team. It takes all of us with all of our special skills and talent in order to have the impact we want to have.