RULE Alumni Spotlight:
by Hilary Hauck, RULE XVI

I began my RULE journey at the Study Institute at the Nittany Lion Inn as an imposter. I was a writer and a translator, not a leader. And as a writer, the words I’d written on my application did not help: I want to make a difference. Had I found words that were specific, they might have clued me in to why exactly I was there.

RULE XVI was a path that beckoned, but it was veiled in a nebulous haze, revealing only the first step or two. Over the course of my journey, the haze gradually lifted, until I was able to connect with my leadership purpose.

Because of RULE, I have held positions of leadership in the writing community. I have recently completed a four-year term as president of Pennwriters, a non-profit organization to support writers of all genres spanning Pennsylvania and beyond. One of the many highlights was hosting JD as a speaker at our 32nd Annual Conference in Pittsburgh, where she swept an entire hall-full of writers to self-awareness, self-belief, and tears in less than an hour.

I’m also the Chair of the Festival of Books in the Alleghenies, thrilled to work with an outstanding team which includes RULE’s own Dave Popp. We launched our first Festival in 2018 at the Bedford Springs Resort, followed by the Somerset Historical Society in 2019.

The annual event is a celebration of authors and community, and a forum for raising awareness about and funds for literacy needs across the three counties of Bedford, Somerset, and Cambria. If we succeed in raising literacy levels, starting with the youngest members of our communities, we raise graduation rates, the local economy, and the community as a whole.

This year, we’re responding to the pandemic by taking the Festival virtual, livestreaming a weekly author series with the aim of creating that Festival experience of being able to meet authors, while urging direct donations to libraries who aren’t able to host their much-needed annual fundraisers.

Pennwriters and the Festival of Books are areas of my life that now bear the clarity of specific wording I can draw upon to describe how I am making a difference. But of course, leadership isn’t just about positions and roles, it’s about inner journeys: the ones we go on, and the ones we empower others to go on. The blossoming of what’s already inside.

Here I like to draw a parallel between leadership and story. In a story, the protagonist is thrust into a journey, albeit less willingly than my arrival at RULE. They face challenges and conflict, until they reach a point of having to rise to the occasion if they are to succeed—others are depending on them. They need to reach deep inside and draw out what has already been there all along.
My characters are often very ordinary, yet they are all on a journey to discover their extraordinary selves, and nowadays they’re the ones with imposter syndrome. Whether it’s a coal miner finding the courage to own his gift for music and compose a symphony, or a candle finding its life’s purpose in the light it provides as it burns to his end; whether the story is set in my former home of Italy, or my childhood home of the UK, or a world that exists only on the page, ultimately someone will connect to their true self, and from there, fully blossom.

The name of the coal miner and gifted musician I mention is Pietro. He is the main character in my novel, From Ashes the Song, which is being released later this year by Sunbury Press. The path to publication has not been one I could have envisaged, but now I trust the haze as it lifts to reveal unexpected treasures. One of these has been that the only in-person celebration after signing the book contract and before the pandemic plunged us into isolation was with JD and RULE speaker, Larry Schardt. I also celebrated virtually with Danielle Rhubart and Genna Kasun, RULE XVI Scholars.

The book is a work of fiction, but it was inspired by actual people—three Italians who came over in the great wave of immigration in 1911, just a few faces amongst the many thousands who came here, with all their unique talents and expertise, trusting the path to enable the next generation to walk upon theirs.

Although as an author, I might not fit the typical mold of a leader—if there even is one—I do feel great responsibility to use the tools I’ve been given. Not every society since the dawn of time has had the wheel, but they have all had storytelling. Our brains are wired for stories. Stories help us navigate reality, and inform us about such things as feelings, the past, and what might be.

Thanks to the power of MRIs, today we know that when we’re reading a story, our brain activity isn’t that of an observer, but of a participant. And so as I thrust my characters on their paths of challenge and overcoming to draw out what has been inside them all along, I’m aware that there might be a few readers who connect to the story, and they might find the haze on their path lifting, empowering them to blossom. That sounds like a pretty darn good story to me.