

“Rotz Lionizes Lyrics for RULE Resonance”

RULE Alumni Spotlight:

by Joel Rotz, RULE X

While I don’t disagree with the often cited Jackie DeShannon song of the 1960’s, *“What the world needs now is love sweet love...”* I also believe what the world needs now is: **leadership, sweet, admirable leadership for us all to exemplify**. My humble opinion is our examples of leadership only demonstrate to us bullying and intimidation to achieve one’s own world view and to diminish the rest that differ. Unfortunately, I believe our social media culture only emboldens “bully leadership.” The followers of those “leaders” are like minded. Those who come from other perspectives are totally alienated by the bullies. **How can we nurture true leaders in our world today? Where and how do we learn leadership?** I hope your answer is not Facebook or Twitter.

Having an agricultural background and growing up on a farm, I experienced leadership opportunities in 4H and then later in FFA as a youth. Once I became a young adult, I was too old for those programs and always recognized a vacuum of opportunities for adults to continue leadership learning and experiences. Eventually, I became involved in Farm Bureau.

For those who don’t know my history, I spent the first 25 years of my adult life as a dairy farmer and became very active in volunteer leadership of the Franklin County and Pennsylvania Farm Bureau. My involvement led me to feel *“called”* to get my head out from underneath the cows and serve the agricultural industry I love in a different capacity. I pursued and was offered a staff position in Government Affairs at Pennsylvania Farm Bureau. I moved my young family off the farm and returned to school while working at a substantially more than 40 hour a week job because I felt compelled to lead in a servant role to my fellow farmers.

Seventeen years ago, I was accepted into RULE X and grew to appreciate the opportunity the program provides for adults of varying backgrounds and interests to come together in not only a learning experience regarding issues that impact our lives, but in knowing and valuing my classmates’ stations in life. Many were very different than my own and initially hard for me to accept, in some cases. **As the program progressed, my world view changed about people different than me. I learned to appreciate people for who and where they are. That is a quality I believe is needed more than ever for those who feel the call to leadership.**

Our RULE X group struggled pretty mightily at times with clashing and sometimes disruptive personalities, but over time most of us coalesced into a cohesive group. A few classmates, facilitators and staff have touched my life in lasting ways, and I always appreciate when our divergent lives find an opportunity to cross paths.

My leadership experience in RULE was more about the life changing interaction with people very different from myself and the experiences we shared together than anything else. I believe this is a common theme for many who are RULE Alumni.



Joel summiting Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina. Hiking has been his pandemic obsession.



The Rotz family: son-in-law Viktor Haleta and daughter Shelley, wife Ronda, Joel, son-in-law Scott Stuccio and daughter Kristen, son Zach.

After I graduated from RULE, through my role at Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, I was in a position at a critical time several years ago to help play an instrumental part in advocating for the RULE Program to fall under the umbrella of Penn State Extension in the College of Agriculture. I continue to see this as a win for the program's long term viability and to foster broader opportunities for outreach and networking leadership training experiences for adults across our state.

It just seems like a natural progression and a win for Penn State Extension, whose most recognizable and notable program is the 4H youth program, to also have a leadership program for adults through RULE. Thank you, former Extension Director, Dennis Calvin, Acting Dean, Barb Christ, and current Dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences, Rick Roush, for sharing and implementing that vision.

However, just when we thought we had RULE in a better place for long term viability, revenue shortfalls threatened the very existence of Penn State Extension itself as funding was zeroed out of the budget and it was a hard-fought battle to save through the efforts of many, including Farm Bureau, in which again I could play a key role as the primary lobbyist for the organization at the time.

Come this November, our state legislature will be making some very hard calls on funding across the board because of huge revenue shortfalls caused by the closing of the economy over the pandemic concerns. Unfortunately, I believe more challenge lies ahead once again for the future of Extension and RULE state budget lines, but I do hold optimism that our past victories can help propel us forward, if we engage and be leaders on this matter.

I'm getting old enough in years and experience that I'm becoming more and more reflective on life and the God given opportunities. I've been blessed to interact and have personal relationships with so many decision makers and influencers of public policy over the past quarter century of my life.

I've seen the rise of those who stay grounded and lead as servants, and the fall of those who lose touch and believe that they alone know what's best for all others from their own narrow world view.



A PA Farm Bureau fave in Happy Valley is Champ's Reuben. Joel is a devotee.

I owe a debt of gratitude to all that has influenced my life from family, to my faith and to all people and things I've experienced in life's path that has shaped me, including RULE. All of us have unique stories to what has called us to where we are in life and the role we play as leaders. Everyone is a leader in some fashion, if we recognize it or not, and every form of leadership is important. I remind you what I often have to remind myself, and that is to lead with purpose.

Since I began my thoughts in this writing with a musical theme, I will close with one as well. I was chosen by my peers in RULE X to be Master of Ceremonies of our graduation. I chose a song to play that day I still feel speaks volumes to the most important things in life and how it should be lived. **Two themes surface: faith and love.** The song is Lee Ann Womack's **"I Hope You Dance."** I just want to quote my favorite lines in closing and as a continuing challenge to us all as opportunity falls on us to be leaders in a time of great uncertainty and unrest. Those lines are, **"I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean. Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens. Promise me you'll give faith a fighting chance. And when you get the chance to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance."**

The world is calling each of us to dance as leaders in whatever space is ours to embrace and influence. I hope you dance.



A fervent Lions fan, Joel's serendipitous encounter with the Nittany Lion snapped by JD.



Joel with childhood football icon, Franco Harris of Penn State/Pittsburgh Steeler fame at a Philadelphia hotel.