

Acceptance of the Mineralogical Society of America Award for 2017

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Thank you, I am deeply honored to be here today, appreciative to those who consider my science strong enough to write on my behalf, and to the MSA for presenting me with this award. In receiving an early career award, I am left to reflect on how I came to this point. I developed a deep interest in mineralogy and geochemistry near the end of my undergraduate degree in Computer Science. This would never have happened if I had not enrolled in “Historical Geology” taught by Steve Mojzsis. Steve calls it “Hysterical Geology,” which I think is only partially a joke. Whatever the case, he teaches the class exceptionally well, and he captured my interest early. I found myself moving from the back of a rather large class to the front as the semester progressed. What was supposed to be a course to satisfy a degree requirement turned into much more than this. Not long afterward, I inquired about graduate studies in Steve’s group. Steve was willing to take a risk on me as a geology M.S. student, with very limited formal training in the natural sciences. For this I will always be grateful.

I also wish to thank my Ph.D. advisor, Bruce Watson, who shaped me into the scientist, and in some respects into the person I am today. When Bruce first contacted me about Ph.D. studies at RPI, I asked him what type of projects he would be willing to support. He politely handed the baton back to me and asked, “What do you want to do? I am here for guidance but this is your Ph.D.” His style of mentoring was exactly what I needed after a “hands-on” M.S. with Steve. I was given as much freedom as any graduate student could reasonably hope for, but this was provided with an open door. Whenever I needed guidance, Bruce was there, but always at a distance and never with a requirement about what should be done. Bruce’s care, rigor, clever experimental design, resourcefulness, and ability to target first-order problems about how the Earth works has been an inspiration to me. Even though I am viewed by many as an experimentalist, I have still managed to hold on to a great group of colleagues who invite me into the field, and allow me to masquerade as a field geologist. While this only happens every few years, I thoroughly enjoy these times. I also thank my former and current colleagues at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, including Mike Ackerson, Daniele Cherniak, Thomas Müller, Nick Tailby, Jay Thomas, and Lingbo Xing; these people made RPI an exciting place for me.

I would also like to acknowledge the great friends and colleagues I have made during my current one year stay at UCLA, including Mélanie Barboni, Beth Ann Bell, Heather Kirkpatrick,



and HaoLan Tang. Thanks particularly to Mark Harrison who has been a nearly constant and positive presence throughout my career. Upon my arrival in L.A., he welcomed me into his home and generously allowed me to set up shop in his office at UCLA, while he spent the year on the East coast. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the University of Rochester. I was provided support, and everything I asked for, to get my research program off the ground.

If I could pick one thing that I have done well thus far, it is this: I have managed to pick great people to work with, and I have made the most of those opportunities. Aside from the people acknowledged above, some people who have influenced me in different ways are in the room today. Whether they realize it or not, they had a profound influence on my development as a scientist. I cannot emphasize this enough. Conversations I had with some of you as early as 2004, either during graduate school visits or during conferences I attended as an undergraduate, still stick in my mind today. I thank you all for showing me the way. Finally, I am most appreciative of my wonderful wife Chiara Borrelli, who unfortunately could not be here today.

Now, it is my job to make sure that that I live up to this honor. I personally view this award as a strong statement of the expectation of accomplishments to come, rather than science that has already been completed. I hope that those who may happen upon this acceptance speech several years from now will feel that I lived up to this expectation.