

Acceptance of the Mineralogical Society of America's Public Service Medal for 2001

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Mr. President, friends, and colleagues, I am very grateful and proud to be this year's recipient of the Mineralogical Society of America's Public Service Medal.

When learning of the award I could not help but think back to 1984 when I was contemplating a job offer from the Smithsonian, only hesitating even slightly because I had always pictured myself in an academic position. I really wanted to teach and it wasn't obvious to me then that there was much opportunity to do that at the Smithsonian. During a phone conversation, however, with Tom Simkin and Dan Appleman, both in the Smithsonian's Department of Mineral Sciences, I was explaining my quandary, when they finally said: if teaching is what you want to do, where else but here can you teach 6 million people per year? My decision was made and I have never regretted it.

The Smithsonian Institution is, of course, a special place. I can't imagine a better place to work; each day offers the potential of some fascinating gem, mineral, or person coming through the door. But even more importantly, the combination of its research programs and public outreach makes the Smithsonian a truly unique and vital interface between science and the public. With over 9 million visitors annually to the Natural History Museum and the ten's of millions more that are contacted by the many outreach programs, there is an unparalleled potential to convey to the public the importance and wonders of minerals and earth science. Obviously, a major factor for my standing here today is this commitment by the Smithsonian to a dual mission of research and public education.

Although awards tend to recognize one individual, the accomplishments that lead to the award almost invariably are a product of many people's efforts. Certainly, such is the case here. I am truly fortunate to work with a group of colleagues that have a great enthusiasm for their science and for public outreach, and they foster an environment that encourages and supports a great variety of outreach activities. We are especially proud of the Geology, Gems, and Minerals Hall that was completed in 1998, and is now visited by approximately 8 million people annually, making it the Smithsonian's most popular exhibit. It was a ten year project that involved every member of our department and many very talented people from our public programs staff, and in particular, my colleagues Sorena Sorensen, Jim Luhr, Mike Wise, Dick Fiske, Tim McCoy, and Glenn MacPherson who were equal partners in this endeavor. This award is as much theirs as mine.



The response of the public to our new exhibit hall, as well as my experiences in other outreach activities makes it clear that the public, of all ages, is fascinated by minerals and earth science in general. But I guess that really isn't so surprising; after all doesn't everyone have at least one rock collection as a kid? And it is also nice to know that they seem genuinely supportive of those of us who want to study them. Minerals are a great way to get scientists and the public, especially kids, talking to each other. Let us keep up our side of the conversation.

Finally, I want to thank my wife Ann for her interest in my work and encouragement during the long years of exhibit building. I have also benefited greatly from having worked with Peter Buseck and Charles Burnham, who enthusiastically encouraged my research and interest in public outreach. I am especially indebted to my former colleague Daniel Appleman, whose passion and talent for explaining science to the public were a wonderful inspiration to many. And thanks to all of you who have assisted with many of our projects and for the enthusiasm with which you have supported them. It means a great deal to us. Again, thank you for this award.