

# JOM Talks with 2020 TMS President Thomas Battle

Kelly Zappas



Tom Battle

**Editor's Note:** Tom Battle will complete his term as 2020 TMS President at the TMS 2021 Virtual Annual Meeting & Exhibition (TMS2021 Virtual), March 15–18, 2021. In this conversation with *JOM*, Battle reflects on the experience of being president during a truly challenging year and discusses his hopes for the future of the Society.

**JOM:** Your term as TMS president included more challenges than most. How do you think TMS has evolved to meet the changing needs of our community over the past year? How do you think this will impact the Society going forward?

**Battle:** At the TMS 2020 Annual Meeting & Exhibition, which took place February 23–27, 2020, the leadership of TMS held many discussions, both formal and informal, on the state of the Society and what we could do to improve the organization going forward. This led to various more-or-less formulated plans for advancing the Society. Within two weeks of the end of the conference, all of those plans vanished when the world changed. Staff and volunteers did an amazing job of discarding our planning for the world as it was and adapting to the world as it was becoming. The shape of the future for organizations such as ours is still not clear, but we are at the forefront of professional societies in exploring future options.

**JOM:** In your inaugural speech in February last year, you talked about what a great time it was for members to become more involved with the Society. Do you think this message is still relevant? What can members do to get more involved with TMS at this time?

**Battle:** The need for involvement in the organization is *more* relevant as we find ourselves hindered in exchanging technical information in an era where social distancing may not go away anytime soon. We are realizing how important the in-person conferences and courses were. In addition, while many of us are forced to work from home or in a sparsely inhabited environment, we miss the interactions with fellow employees at our home organizations.

TMS is learning to adapt and has



Battle was installed as 2020 TMS President during the TMS-AIME (American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers) Awards Ceremony at TMS2020.

*“Speaking up to support the framework of our outreach to all people, mainstream or marginalized, is necessary for us to move above and beyond perhaps hallowed—but not really inclusive—traditions.”*



Battle virtually introduces the TMS/ASM Joint Distinguished Lectureship in Materials and Society during the Materials Science & Technology 2020 Virtual conference in November 2020.

developed a COVID-19 Materials Needs Exchange that may be a model for future endeavors by the Society. We have created more webinars to foster the exchange of knowledge. We are learning to conduct virtual meetings. None of these would be successful without the assistance of dedicated volunteers to coordinate and lead these new initiatives—or without participants to attend and critique our efforts.

**JOM:** In the past year, TMS has issued position statements and letters to

**government leaders on issues relevant to our communities, including social justice and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Why was it important to speak up on the issues that we addressed?**

**Battle:** It would have been the easy route for us to just focus on the pandemic and its effect on our membership and Society operation. But these other events may, in the long term, have even more impact on our Society. It has been apparent for many years that we cannot function in a diverse, pluralistic world by continuing to act in a monolithic manner, implicitly or explicitly assuming that running the Society in the traditional way is appropriate for the world as it is (or as it should be). Speaking up to support the framework of our outreach to all people, mainstream or marginalized, is necessary for us to move above and beyond perhaps hallowed—but not really inclusive—traditions.

**JOM:** What do you consider to be your greatest contribution as TMS President?

**Battle:** That I carefully listened to staff, thought about ideas on my own, then approved their recommendations! Although I brought up useful ideas here and there, most of the changes came from staff members and volunteers concerned about our Society and how it needs to adapt to survive and thrive. I worked to keep my mind open to these new ideas. I tried to respect tradition, but also accept



Battle delivers his Presidential Address at the TMS-AIME Awards Ceremony at TMS2020.





In a video to TMS members and prospective TMS2021 Virtual attendees, Battle talked about what a virtual annual meeting experience will look like and shared that he is most looking forward to interactions with colleagues and discussions on technical topics.

new ways of doing things as the Society's business model seemingly vanished in the course of a few weeks. (The model I'm thinking about, of course, is bringing together a diverse group of people from around the world to exchange information and build relationships—the opposite of social distancing!)

**JOM:** What have you found most fulfilling about serving as president?

**Battle:** That we're still above water, solvent, and have a plan to stay that way. That we have managed to keep Society staff gainfully employed. That we have kept most of our volunteers engaged and have plans in place to not only keep them interested and involved in the organization, but to bring in more volunteers.

**JOM:** What lessons are you taking with you from your presidential experience?

**Battle:** When I give advice to science or engineering students, I often tell them that the most important trait they can have is flexibility. You don't know what will come up tomorrow. You may think, for example, that your future will be the particular area you've become an expert in during your studies, or as a result of a research

project. But opportunities can come from the most unexpected places, and you need to assess them as they come along, and pivot as necessary. Well, the entire TMS organization, members, volunteers, and staff have had to pivot in the last year so often, it's a wonder we're not dizzy. But we have accomplished a lot, together, and we have plans for the upcoming year—or until the next pivot!

**JOM:** Is there anything else you'd like to add?

**Battle:** Simply that there's no way we could have gotten through the last year without the benefit of our past expertise, specifically the accumulated experiences of staff and membership and the availability of a "rainy day fund" (which handled well what turned out to be a monsoon). But that alone would not have gotten us through the year. It was building on this knowledge and turning in directions that will make our enterprise more sustainable, more inclusive of the diverse skills and abilities of all in our field that have helped us through this challenging year. Now, we are more prepared to interact with the world as it is and is becoming, and not just the world we came from, not all that long ago.



*"...opportunities can come from the most unexpected places, and you need to assess them as they come along, and pivot as necessary."*