

**MRS** Featured Volunteer

**Alex King**

MRS Councillor, 1998–2000

**What is your favorite element?**  
The element of surprise.

**What do you read first in MRS Bulletin?**  
The classified advertisements. Aside from a constant, though mostly passive interest in finding a new job, these provide the most interesting and useful information about what's hot, and who cares.

**What was the last book you read?**  
*The God of Small Things*, by Arundhati Roy. It seemed, from the title, like it might be a good book for a microscopist to read. It's a wonderful, magically written book. A kind of moral tale gone awry, in which horrifying consequences result from human frailties, miscommunications, and mistimings. Despite all of that, it somehow succeeds in being quite beautiful and uplifting.

**What inspired you to be a materials researcher?**  
Ignorance, bad habits, and an economic recession. When I was an undergraduate I found that some of the stuff I was being taught seemed incomplete, so I used to ask questions about it. One professor, in particular, was quite candid about the shortcomings of the theories that he taught on crystal defects, so I set about trying to find more information. When I graduated from Sheffield University the UK was in the throes of a mad economic cycle and the job offers were not very attractive, so I looked into delaying my entry into real life while I satisfied my curiosity about some of the more obscure questions that I still had. Graduate school was the easy path to follow, and the rest follows from there.

**What did you first do as an MRS volunteer?**  
I believe that I picked up some paper that had fallen to the floor in the registra-



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tion area, some time in the 1980s. On a more formal basis, I was a symposium organizer for the Fall Meeting of 1993. The subject was "Defect-Interface Interactions" which, curiously enough, was the subject that sparked my interest through its incompleteness when I was an undergraduate. Looking through the proceedings, I realize that I am now just as confused about the subject as I was nearly 25 years ago, but on a higher level.

**What is your Motto?**  
I have a different motto for almost every situation. Most are plagiarized from more creative minds than my own. My favorites include a statement variously ascribed, but I think the Emperor Tiberius said it first, in response to the news that the citizens of Rome hated him: "*Oderint dum metuant*" (Let them hate me, so long as they fear me). Despite that, I can't quite seem to get my students to hate me. I'll just settle for fear.

**If you were not a materials researcher, what would you be?**

Unemployed. If I had the money (which I don't) I would go back to

school, and it matters very little for which subject. I never pass up the opportunity to be a student. Taking a short course is a great reminder of what a privilege it is to have no responsibility but to learn. I might study law, or medicine, or the culinary arts...Now if I had to earn my living, I guess I would have to make use of the skills I have available. I could be an academic administrator. (Done that already. No skills required at all!) I could be a cook, which is very much in my family's tradition. I do love to cook, but I would be professionally impaired by also loving to eat what I cook. If I could just start over and pick a different career, I am not sure what I would do. I love to travel, so maybe a diplomatic job? I could be happy as a scientific attaché in a nice embassy somewhere. I would like to be a writer, but I lack the discipline.

**What common household item do you use in your lab?**  
Dustpan and brush. I feel that it is very important for my students to develop a high level of skill in the application of these vital tools.

*Alex King is currently a member of the Materials Research Society Council and chairs the International Affairs Subcommittee. Before that, he co-chaired the MRS Spring 1997 Meeting, implementing the "Meeting Chairs' Poster Prize," and served as a symposium organizer at the MRS Fall 1993 Meeting and on the Meetings Quality Subcommittee. He is professor and head of the School of Materials Engineering at Purdue University.*

To contribute to **MRS Featured Volunteer**, send in your responses to the questions to *MRS Bulletin*, 506 Keystone Drive, Warrendale, PA 15086-7573, USA; fax 724-779-8313; e-mail [Bulletin@mrs.org](mailto:Bulletin@mrs.org). Include your name, volunteer activity, address, fax, and e-mail.