1998 Award for Distinguished Public Service

The 1998 Award for Distinguished Public Service was presented during the 104th Annual Meeting of the AMS in Baltimore. Proper recognition for mathematicians who contribute valuable service to the profession is a matter of great importance to the Society. The continued growth and health of the discipline depends in large part on those individuals who contribute their time to public service activities in support of mathematics. To provide encouragement and recognition for such service, the AMS Council, responding to a recommendation from the Committee on Science Policy, established the Award for Distinguished Public Service. The $4,000 award is presented every two years to a research mathematician who has made a distinguished contribution to the mathematics profession through public service during the previous five years. Previous recipients of the award are Kenneth M. Hoffman (1990), Harvey B. Keynes (1992), I. M. Singer (1993), and D. J. Lewis (1995).

The 1998 Award for Distinguished Public Service was presented to KENNETH C. MILLETT. The award is made by the Council acting through a selection committee whose members at the time of this selection were: Ronald L. Graham, Harvey B. Keynes, Peter D. Lax, Everett Pitcher, and I. M. Singer.

The text below contains the committee's citation, a biographical sketch, and Professor Millett's response upon receiving the award.

Citation

Professor Kenneth C. Millett of the University of California at Santa Barbara has been selected by the Council of the American Mathematical Society for the Award for Distinguished Public Service for

Kenneth C. Millett

1998. His notable accomplishments include his work devoted to underrepresented minority students in mathematical science. This appears in particular in his founding of the UCSB Achievement Program, in his direction of the mathematics component of the Summer Academic Research Internship, and in his direction of the residential Summer Institute in Mathematics and Science for students entering UCSB.
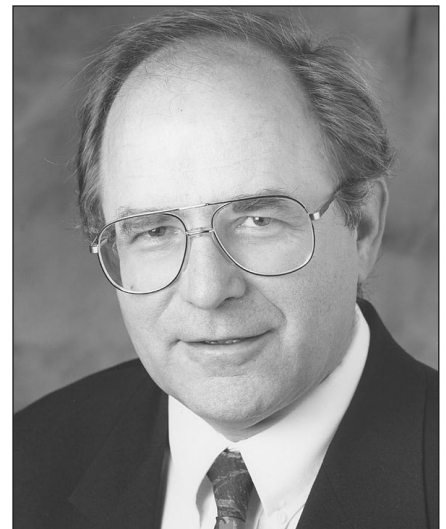
Biographical Sketch

Kenneth C. Millett is currently professor of mathematics at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He was the founding president and executive director of the California Coalition for Mathematics and Science. He is the regional director of the California Alliance for Minority Participation. Millett received his B.S. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1963 and received his M.S. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1964 and 1967, respectively. Following lecturer appointments at UCLA and MIT, he joined the faculty of the University of California in 1969. Since then he has been a visiting professor at the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques, Princeton University, Occidental College, UCLA, MSRI, several French research institutes and universities, most recently the Université de Provence in Marseille, and at the LOMI, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

He is married to Janis Cox Millett, an educational consultant. He is the father of Rebecca Millett, of New York City, and David Millett, a student at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He was born on November 16, 1941, in Hustisford, Wisconsin, and grew up in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, with his sisters, Diane, Rita, and Roxanne. His parents, Clarence and Isola Millett, live in Oconomowoc on Lac La Belle.

His research interests include the geometric topology of manifolds and knot theory. In 1985 he participated in the discovery of new families of invariants associated to classical knots. His current research projects are focused on the study of these algebraic invariants; the extension to knotted graphs; the study and development of algorithms to detect knotting, random knotting and linking of curves in space; and the topology and geometry of spaces of polygonal knots. In addition, he is interested in applications to theoretical physics, to topological fluid dynamics, to the molecular biology of enzyme action on DNA, to the dynamics of polymers, and to the topological structure of molecules. In 1988 he received the Carl B. Allendoerfer Award, and in 1991 he received the Chauvenet Prize for an article on knot theory written with W. B. R. Lickorish. He has published over forty scientific papers and edited four research volumes. He has also written articles on mathematics education and educational reform as well as developing materials to increase public understanding and support for the renewal and reform of mathematics teaching and learning.

Millett has been active in efforts to reform mathematics education in California through work with the AMS, Mathematical Association of America, the California Mathematics Project, the California Mathematics Council, the Mathematicians and Educational Reform Network, and the California Coalition for Mathematics and Science. From 1985 through 1997 he was a member of the statewide Advisory Committee of the California Mathematics Project, which he chaired as well as chairing its Executive Committee. Millett is the University of California's representative to the Academic Council of the College Board and was elected to its Western Regional Council, which he now chairs. He was also elected Member-at-large of the Section Committee of the Mathematics Section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

At UCSB he is the founder of the UCSB Achievement Program, dedicated to assisting the highest level of achievement of underrepresented minority students in mathematics and science. He has directed highly successful mathematics components of the Summer Academic Research Internships, in which more than a dozen minority students have worked on research projects under his direction. He directs the three-week residential Summer Institute in Mathematics and Science for some thirty underrepresented students in mathematics and science entering UCSB in the fall. In 1991 he was a co-founder of the South Coast Partnership for the Teaching and Learning of Mathematics. The Partnership consists of individuals working to increase the mathematical achievement of underrepresented minority students in the South Coast area through a summer internship program and academic year programs. This program places twenty fellows in summer school classes and awards scholarships to underrepresented students entering mathematics and science credential programs.

Response

I am deeply moved to have received the 1998 Award for Distinguished Public Service. The work it recognizes is deeply personal, even closer to my heart than mathematics. May I explain? Within the University of California, I serve as the Regional Director of the NSF-funded California Alliance for Minority Participation (CAMP), a project that funds much of this work. I am also supported by a couple of my colleagues in mathematics as well as my dean, my chancellor, and senior statewide leadership of the University of California. And I am blessed with a family that loves me without reservation, a family whose fidelity sustains me, and a family whose capacity to love extends deeply into the lives of all who know them. For as long as I can remember, our family has shared whatever it has with others—people of all ethnicities, languages, traditions, and styles of life. For me this has meant sharing the love, the understanding, and the adventure of mathematics and science.

The support of all these has been essential to my continuing in this work. So I am surprised to be recognized for doing what I love: working with dedicated, creative, intelligent young people who have the strongest desire to learn and to succeed. I learn with them and I learn from them. I get up each morning facing new challenges, experiencing quite a few successes, and encountering a defeat or two along the way. (But my dad says, "If you don't fail every once in a while, you're just not trying hard enough!")

To be recognized for this by my colleagues, research mathematicians, and members of the American Mathematical Society—what an amazing idea. Fellow AMS members, I wish to urge you to join me in this effort to invite, support, and sustain all persons, independent of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, ability or disability in their pursuit of mathematics. While there are some who don't share this dream, may I assure you, there are many others like you and me. Our profession's future requires that we succeed. We can do it! My heartfelt thanks. God bless you all.