

AVS 2020 Recognition for Excellence in Mentorship: Theva Thevuthasan

By Abby Rizzo

AVS has honored Dr. Theva Thevuthasan, [EMSL](#), at [Pacific Northwest National Laboratory](#) (PNNL), with the AVS 2020 Recognition for Excellence in Mentorship. AVS seeks to recognize individuals from all scientific backgrounds, who not only excel in science and/or engineering, but who also, through mentoring, have enhanced the careers of future generations who might not otherwise have considered or had access to opportunities in science, engineering, and technology. While Theva brings extensive scientific accomplishments to the scientific community, he also brings some of his best qualities to his relationships with his mentees. These qualities have been described as his honesty, integrity, commitment, diligence, and passion. We wanted to know more about Theva, and were delighted when he graciously agreed to an interview. We learned more about his mentoring, his relationship with AVS, and his professional and personal life.



Mentoring

Theva has done an exceptional job at mentoring not only many different levels of scientists, but also a significant number of them too. Theva's nominator indicated that Theva has mentored at multiple levels, including high school students, undergraduates (including students from disadvantaged community colleges), graduate students, high school teachers, postdocs, and PNNL staff members. In fact, Theva has received two mentoring-related awards from PNNL, with at least 80 mentees noted. Theva reflected on how much his mentoring work at PNNL means to him, explaining that he believes he "is best known for my passion in developing my staff's skills, supporting their efforts, and bringing them together to accomplish the best science possible." He truly enjoys "developing researchers through scientific and administrative mentoring and guidance to accomplish collective research goals." He feels "there is something very rewarding about motivating and guiding others to reach their potential." Theva excels at guiding others to reach their full potential because he has his own formula for success. He explained, "Commit to your tasks and put in 100% effort and hard work – it will pay off and at the end of the day, you can be satisfied that you did your best. Along the way, also work on networking and building connections with those around you." Clearly, Theva has a well-rounded philosophy, which provides his mentees with a great example to follow. Yet, Theva reveals his approachable, kind, and humble attitude when he explains that he is "inspired daily by the hardworking, dedicated staff around me."

Theva has accomplished a great deal, but he acknowledged that he has had a lot of help. When asked who encourages and inspires him, he mentioned that his family has always motivated and supported him. He feels lucky to have also found several amazing mentors throughout his career, starting with his father and grandfather during his formative years. Later, he cited Professor William Unertl, an "exceptional mentor from the University of Maine," who guided him through his doctoral program. Theva also mentioned the late Professor Chuck Fadley, "the world-renowned scientist, who molded me into new science during my three years of postdoctoral research." He also added that several scientists had guided him through his career at PNNL, specifically Don Baer, Chuck Peden, Allison Campbell, and Lou Terminello.

Relationship with AVS

Theva has a long history of service with and recognition from AVS. He discovered and joined AVS while training as a surface scientist during his graduate studies in 1989. He attended the AVS International Symposium & Exhibition, and found the topics discussed quite relevant to his research at the time. As he deepened his involvement with AVS, he appreciated the message of AVS and “the incredible opportunities AVS brings to scientists around the world.” He enjoys membership in a few other professional associations as well, including those from the high-energy ion beam community (IBA, CAARI) and MRS. He explained some of the reasons he has stayed dedicated to AVS. “Each of my experiences with AVS has been very positive, interesting, and exciting. The professional growth and networking opportunities at AVS are tremendous and they have helped the professional growth of many researchers including myself.” After Theva had experienced what AVS has to offer for some years, he decided to start volunteering for the Society. Since then, he has served in multiple capacities, starting as Board Member (Secretary) of the Short Courses Executive Committee (SCEC), SCEC New Course Developer, and eventually he accepted the role of Chair of the SCEC from 2008-2010. He has also made significant contributions to the AVS Pacific Northwest Chapter (PNWAVS). In 2010, AVS also recognized Theva as an AVS Fellow.

Beneath the Surface

No one can deny that Theva works hard. In fact, his favorite quote evidences it nicely. He explained, “There is an old saying in my native language, Tamil: *“Muyatchi udaiyar igalshi adaiyar,”* and it means: if one puts in hard work, he/she cannot fail. It has stuck with me since a young age, and I try to embody the spirit of these words in my daily life.” He does, as his typical day in the lab starts early, and goes until late. During his day, he works on multiple research and development activities with many different people. Instead of resting at lunch time, on most days he goes for a run with his running group. This group consists of some familiar names in the AVS community, including Don Baer, Mark Engelhard, Scott Lea, Penny Colton, and Nancy Hess. Once he heads home though, he enjoys spending time with his children, frequently sharing a tennis game with them and helping them with their homework. In his spare time, Theva also pursues a range of hobbies, like running, hiking and taking in nature, vegetable gardening, and playing tennis. He also loves to watch movies, read, and play card games.

Although Theva has a very full professional and personal life, he still likes to dream big. He has already begun tackling his next big project. Currently, he and a large team are designing and establishing a research facility with 52 state-of-the-art laboratories and over 200 offices. He feels enthusiastic about this project and greatly looks forward to making contributions towards the success of this new facility. Undoubtedly, his commitment towards the project will ensure the project’s completion because Theva’s work ethic can be summed up by the two quotes that inspire him. The first one is by Mahatma Ghandi, “Satisfaction lies in the effort, not in the attainment,” as well as Colin Powell’s quote, “A dream does not become reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination, and hard work.” Obviously, Theva knows a thing or two about hard work.

Please join the AVS community in congratulating him on his well-deserved AVS 2020 Recognition of Excellence in Mentorship.