

February 28, 2025

Amy Adams, Program Coordinator
Museum of Deaf History, Art, and Culture
455 E Park St
Olathe, KS 66061

Dear Amy,

When we stare into the night sky, each star tells a story - some burning bright with purpose, others finding new positions as their time in a particular formation evolves. Today, I must acknowledge that my star in the MDHAC constellation is shifting its orbit, no longer able to shine in the position it once held with such pride.

The journey of a docent is like that of a sculptor, chiseling away at misconception until understanding emerges from the stone of ignorance. For years, I have carved pathways through the museum's halls, transforming everyday facts into transcendent experiences. Each tour became a living canvas where visitors could witness the vibrant brushstrokes of Deaf history painting itself before their eyes.

My path with MDHAC officially began in 2018, during one of my darkest moments. After the election, I felt lost - dismissed - crushed. When someone from MDHAC invited me to sit at the front desk, I hesitated. Putting myself in public view again felt overwhelming, but it aligned with my passion for writing legal advocacy strategies on my laptop. I accepted, not realizing this small "yes" would transform my life's direction.

Nearly a year later, when docent training opportunities arose through a partnership with Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, my name wasn't on the candidate list. Yet somehow, as the person staffing the front desk, I was invited to participate as an unofficial candidate. I never intended to excel - in fact, I secretly hoped to perform poorly enough that I wouldn't be asked to lead tours. I worried the public wasn't ready for my perspectives on Deaf history and culture, which some considered too direct or intense.

Then came that pivotal moment - giving a practice tour to volunteers from that same large museum. Something unexpected happened. These visitors resonated deeply with my authentic presentation of our Deaf history, perspectives, and visual way of experiencing the world. Their enthusiastic response, coupled with encouragement from the same person who first invited me to the front desk, convinced me to embrace this role I'd been avoiding.

Now I stand at a crossroads. My work building Deaf leadership across the nation flows like a river that has outgrown its local banks and seeks broader horizons. This inner purpose draws me forward with the gravitational pull of countless stars, irresistible in its power.

Meanwhile, the museum I once knew has transformed. Displays change without discussion, like paragraphs rewritten mid-story. The narrative I carefully constructed now contains segments I did not author, elements inserted without context, altering the story's very meaning. How can one tend a garden when the landscape itself shifts beneath one's hands?

Within these walls now exists a subtle current of dismissal - not violent like a storm, but persistent like erosion. My contributions, once treasured insights, now seem to disappear into seas of indifference. In spaces where my perspectives once flourished, I now perceive only fading impressions.

The displays I meticulously incorporated into my tours have been altered without consultation, creating a disconnect between my prepared narrative and the visual story now presented. It feels like watching a familiar landscape suddenly rearrange itself, making my carefully mapped journey impossible to follow.

My work on the proclamation for governors to recognize our community - words I selected to transform perceptions from medical pathology to cultural celebration - was altered without discussion before its presentation. The revised document, stripped of nuanced language highlighting our visual-spatial intelligence and unique contributions to humanity, felt like watching a vibrant painting fade to muted tones. When we reshape the public narrative about our existence but find our own words rewritten, we lose the authentic perspective that makes advocacy powerful.

This pattern of disconnect feels especially poignant given the deep historical ties between KAD and this museum. In the 1980s, KAD spearheaded crucial fundraising drives that helped transform MDHAC from vision into reality. Even the LaRosh Fund contributed directly to this museum's construction. That foundation of mutual support makes the current distance all the more striking - like two branches that once grew from the same trunk now bending in different directions.

More recently, my research about local Deaf history and the LaRosh Fund scholarship hasn't received the acknowledgment I believed it deserved. Offering these insights feels like extending a hand in friendship only to find it remains unclasped.

I've also experienced a growing discomfort in the museum atmosphere. Where I once freely shared my cultural knowledge, I now find myself constrained by an invisible boundary of judgment. The joy of cultural exchange has been overshadowed by the weight of unseen scrutiny. What once felt like fertile ground for authentic expression now feels like shallow soil where genuine contributions struggle to take root.

Deafhood demands authenticity. It requires spaces where our truths can breathe without constraint. When research meets skepticism, when history is treated as malleable rather than sacred, when lived experience is subordinated to administrative convenience - these create rifts that widen with time.

I've been fortunate to witness different styles of leadership during my time at MDHAC. In the past, the museum radiated a welcoming energy that made volunteers feel appreciated for their contributions rather than merely fulfilling obligations. The atmosphere fostered creativity, mutual respect, and genuine community building. Volunteers eagerly returned, knowing their passion for Deaf culture was valued above all else. This collaborative spirit has dimmed in recent months, replaced by an environment that treats freely given time as a commodity and passion as a resource to be managed. The contrast between these approaches is evident in how volunteers now select their days of service, gravitating toward times when their contributions are celebrated rather than merely extracted.

The transformation in visitors' understanding when they grasp that being Deaf isn't about absence but presence - a vibrant way of experiencing the world through visual and spatial intelligence - has been the most rewarding aspect of my work.

With this letter, I am formally withdrawing from my dedicated volunteer position as a docent tour guide at MDHAC. Like a meteor shower that transforms into individual shooting stars, each carrying wishes across the sky, my experiences here have scattered brilliant moments of connection that will illuminate paths I've yet to travel.

I extend my deepest gratitude to everyone at MDHAC who provided the space for me to develop as a cultural ambassador. However, the current environment has become increasingly difficult for me to navigate. The dismissive treatment of my contributions, changes made to exhibits without consultation, and the uncomfortable atmosphere created by certain individuals have effectively pushed me away from the institution I once loved serving. These behaviors have transformed from occasional frustrations into a pattern that signals my full participation is no longer valued. While these experiences have shaped me profoundly, it's clear I must direct my energy where toxic interactions don't impede my ability to contribute meaningfully to our community's representation.

My connection to our cultural heritage remains undiminished. While stepping back from scheduled docent responsibilities, I'll continue to visit the museum and participate in special events. Consider this not a departure but a transformation - like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, my dedication to our shared mission takes a new form while maintaining its essential nature.

I still believe in MDHAC's potential to be a sanctuary where Deaf culture, art and history can flourish authentically. Perhaps when the museum establishes proper governance boundaries and accountability structures, when power is distributed rather than concentrated, and when volunteer contributions are welcomed rather than redirected, my regular involvement might resume. Until then, I must follow the path that allows my energy to flow most freely toward the advancement of our community in the most healthy form.

Even as I shift my position, my commitment to preserving and celebrating our cultural legacy continues unabated. Like water finding a new channel, my dedication flows onward, nourishing different ground but still part of the same essential river.

The stars in the night sky don't disappear when they move positions - they simply shine their light from a new place. That's what I'm doing now.

With unwavering dedication to our shared journey,

Chris Haulmark

CC: Chriz Dally

CC: Suz Dennis

CC: Kim Anderson