

**Deborah (Debbie) Lenk**  
**Executive Director, Museum of Glass, Tacoma, WA**

## **Opening statement**

Museum of Glass, affectionately known as “MOG”, is based in Tacoma, Washington, the third largest city in the state, and one of the fastest growing. Long known as the Gritty City, we are known for our hard work and willingness to roll up our sleeves to change what needs to change for life to be equitable and accessible for all. Today, Tacoma is experiencing an influx of young families and emerging artists who are attracted to our quality of life and our reputation as a maker-city. These new residents join soldiers who serve at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, just ten miles from the city’s center, and a host of visionary community leaders who continue to want the very best for Tacoma.

Tacoma is part of Pierce County, one of the most topographically diverse counties in the nation, from the deep-water Port of Tacoma in Commencement Bay to Mount Rainier at 14,000 feet. Pierce County is also honored to have the Nisqually and Puyallup Indian Reservations within our borders. In fact, Museum of Glass, is located on Puyallup tribal land. We are deeply grateful to the Puyallup people, and to the Coast Salish tribes of Western Washington which have recently served as advisors on two of the Museum’s Native American glass art exhibitions.

Museum of Glass, which opened its doors in downtown Tacoma in 2002, was built on a former Super Fund site and was the first EPA reclamation of a marine waterway in the United States. Substantial economic impacts have resulted from this federal investment, with MOG now serving as the cornerstone of the ongoing development of the Thea Foss Waterway on which the Museum stands. In addition to MOG, the downtown area is comprised of five other museums. This cultural area is a draw for both locals and tourists, providing an economic driver for the city.

Our area overall is home to the largest concentration of glass artists in the world, making MOG a vital player in shaping the future of glass in the Pacific Northwest, nationally, and internationally through glassmaking, exhibitions, and programming. Unique among museums, MOG is a hands-on makers’ space where creativity becomes art every day.

The Museum’s mission is to ignite creativity, fuel discovery, and enrich lives through glass and glassmaking.

As a relatively young institution with an enthusiastic board and staff, MOG has established a reputation for:

- Hosting engaging artist residencies

- Developing nationally traveling glass exhibitions that encourage dialogue among visitors about the important issues of our time, and
- Creating unique programs that celebrate the arts as inspirational and healing.

A crowning feature of the Museum is our Hot Shop, which is the West Coast's largest and most active glassmaking studio. Our Hot Shop includes a large amphitheater and two furnaces each filled with 1,000 pounds of molten glass. This gem of Tacoma is located in an iconic stainless-steel cone. Our Hot Shop affords MOG the opportunity to invite artists to experiment and work with our renowned team, often resulting in a new body of work for the artist. The Hot Shop also uses glassmaking to heal and inspire those in our community. It is truly a magical place where transformation is encouraged and celebrated.

Thanks to the National Endowment of the Arts, Museum of Glass has been able to deepen our understanding of the arts as healing, through Hot Shop Heroes, a glassmaking program, for soldiers and veterans with post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury and other depressive disorders. The NEA was one of the first to step forward to support the Museum's efforts to not only engage soldiers and veterans in their recovery, but also to more fully understand why a structured series of glassmaking classes seems to profoundly impact wellness.

NEA has been an important partner in the development, continuation, and growth of Hot Shop Heroes, including the nationwide expansion of the program.

Museum of Glass also collaborates with Creative Forces, a network committed to improving the well-being of service members, veterans, and their families through creativity and community. Creative Forces was established by the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the U.S. Department of Defense. MOG has been actively engaged with Creative Forces and received funding in the first quarter of 2020 to help purchase tools and molds for our Hot Shop Heroes Advanced Production Class.

Due to COVID-19, it has been more than a year since we were last able to invite Visiting Artists to the Hot Shop or provide transformative hands-on programming such as Hot Shop Heroes. According to the [Washington State Department of Commerce](#), Washington is sixth in the nation in the number of active-duty military within its borders. The military and defense sector employs another 39,000 civilians, mostly at JBLM and Puget Sound Naval Shipyard (PSNS), the latter of which is located about 35 miles north of Museum of Glass. The state also tracks a veteran's population higher than the national average.

Our location in Western Washington meant we were at the epicenter of the first documented cases of COVID-19 in February 2020. Our governor, Jay Inslee, acted quickly, declaring a state of emergency on February 29, followed by an order to shutdown schools and all non-essential

indoor venues including museums, effective March 17. Museum of Glass would not open again until September 25, and only for a brief period, until on November 16, when rising COVID numbers resulted in a second shutdown issued by Governor Inslee. Today our Museum remains shuttered.

We never imagined a world where Museum of Glass would operate for only four months in 2020. It was the first time in 20 years our Hot Shop and programming went idle. During uncertain and dark times, people look to art for healing and inspiration. It was, and remains, a heavy burden for MOG to not be able to serve our community in the same manner we have for two decades.

It has been an extraordinary time with continuous concern about the financial impacts of being closed. We have been fortunate to date, thanks to the CARES Act funding, our committed Board of Trustees, and being permitted to open for a brief period. We know many other arts organizations were not so lucky.

An independent, nonprofit news site in Seattle, *Crosscut*, [recently surveyed](#) 118 local arts organizations on the impact of COVID-19. The majority (72%) of respondents said they do not have enough cash on hand to cover operating expenses for the next 12 months. About a quarter of respondents indicated their cash balance would only get them through two to three more months. This is the reality for us, and other nonprofit arts organizations.

Fifty percent of MOG's revenue comes from admission tickets, hands-on and other educational classes. An immediate, and ongoing concern has been conservation of cash. To sustain the organization for the long term and position us for what would be a very unpredictable year, immediately after closing we placed all staff on furlough. It was difficult and took an emotional toll. Many had not been on unemployment before and with offices overwhelmed by the volume of claims, there were challenges with getting all staff taken care of.

On behalf of Museum of Glass staff, we want to express our gratitude for the additional weekly unemployment benefit, \$600 in the spring and summer and \$300 per week this fall and winter. That did help provide staff still on furlough some stability, and ease anxiety and fear, but the impact of this year on mental health of our staff, the emerging artists, youth, members of the military, and underserved communities we, and our counterparts in the Tacoma Museum District serve, will not be easily healed.

The financial instability of families, stress of parents homeschooling children, the social and political climate, fear of coronavirus and constant state of evolving restrictions have pushed people to their limits. Our communities need art more than ever. Throughout the past 12 months we have focused squarely on providing what programs we can in order to give people hope, and we have worked to ensure our staff have jobs when MOG can reopen.

MOG has virtually moved our mission forward by creating and adapting programs to video formats to support homeschooling and community center programs, while temporarily placing other programs on pause. We have examined relationships with underserved/marginalized neighbors and intentionally maintained relationships with supporters, and we are making plans to re-open.

Museum of Glass applied for and received Cares Act PPP and EIDL loans. These have been critical lifelines to bring staff back. They allowed us to push ourselves in exciting directions and begin developing new virtual programs for use in schools. As a past grantee recipient, we also received a special Cares Act grant from the NEA to reopen the Hot Shop. That helped us evolve our glassblowing techniques and create safe processes to blow glass during COVID. Our blow pipes have been adapted to use with masks and processes have been changed to allow more distance among team members. This is a critical step for us in developing and trialing glassblowing so we can safely reopen the Hot Shop.

While we were able to create new ways to serve the community with the help of the PPP, EIDL, and NEA funding, the reality is we would not have survived as an organization without them.

What we have weathered will, ultimately, make us stronger. On April 2, 2021 Museum of Glass will reopen, and we believe guests are ready to return. In Washington, vaccine supply is growing, and we are seeing optimism grow, too. We look forward to reengaging with neighborhood community centers, as well as with families and youth served by programs that had to be put on hold. Our popular hands-on programs will be reworked in the short term. Our new virtual programming is versatile enough to continue serving schools for the time being and then to become a valuable teaching tool when students return to class full time.

A priority as we return this Spring is to bring back Hot Shop Heroes. We look forward to resuming work with the Soldier Recovery Unit and the Intrepid Spirit Center at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and with the Veterans Administration. Hot Shop Heroes supports the individual therapies designed to help soldiers and veterans return to active duty or to transition successfully into civilian life.

We appreciate this opportunity to share our experience in navigating the unprecedented impacts of COVID-19 on the arts. While we are hopeful, we need people – both our staff and visitors – to feel safe returning to museums. For many, feeling safe means receiving the vaccine. Access is increasing, but much work is needed to ensure all Americans are vaccinated.

At the institutional level, the health of Museum of Glass and organizations like us is dependent on funding provided by organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts, which enable us to do what we do best – heal our communities through art.

We hope we can count on your support in rebuilding arts and cultural organizations nationwide.

Museum of Glass thanks you for the opportunity to share our experiences dealing with the impact that Covid-19 has made on the arts.