



Museums are critically important, formative, analyst says

By Mark E. McCormick
Executive Director, Kansas African American Museum
AAAM Board Member

James Chung, founder of New York-based Reach Advisors, addressed the Mountain Plains Museum Association convention last year in Kansas. Chung, who specializes in predictive analytics, introduced the audience of cash-starved museum executive directors, development directors, archivists, curators and education directors to a startling quote from one of the world's foremost philanthropists, Bill Gates. Chung flashed this quote on the screen:

“Is it even morally ethical to donate to museums...”

The air left the room. For many of the organizations present, “cash-starved” represented tremendous understatement. Years ago, Kansas state government slashed arts funding. Museums have scrounged for the revenue to keep the doors open. The majority have lived in a museum version of a baseball, base-path rundown, darting back and forth between development strategies hoping to avoid a tag out by further cuts or a slumping economy.

Most of the museum professionals there understood that they've competed with homeless shelters, food banks and children's homes for support. That made Gates' comment about the folly of donating to art and cultural education when there are people in need of basics like food, water and shelter, even more daunting.

A bleak picture, you might say.

Not necessarily, Chung said. Moving casually across the stage and speaking into a lapel microphone, he clicked the audience through a power point about the kinds of data he'd collected on how people said they've benefitted from museums.



Visitors said, museums make people “more tolerant,” inspire them “to grow, stretch and learn,” make them “more compassionate,” “better global (and local) citizens,” and cause them to “want to contribute to this world.”

Without museums, Chung explained, we would always have a world strangely tolerant of hunger and homelessness and lost children. We wouldn’t develop an essential dimension of our humanity without museums.

Museums aren’t luxuries or the provenance of the wealthy, he said.

Museums build better people and a better society.

It’s a story worth telling, Chung said, to our audiences and to ourselves.

(Excerpted from Wichita Magazine)