

# Gate-Gateway to Independence

## 2026 Spring Newsletter



### *SPRINGing into fun!*

Spring semester at the Gate has been full of fun, creativity, and friends! We packed in a lot from January to May, including DessertFest preparations, Special Olympics Basketball and Track and Field, and a visit from National Park Rangers. The semester is almost over and it's time for summer break, but we will have so much planned for the next Gate year. We can't wait to see you again!

### *DessertFest 2026*



DessertFest was on April 11<sup>th</sup> at Alcoa High School. In attendance were Gate participants and families, friends, and many community members.

There were so many sweet treats to sample, a silent auction, art, and cards made by participants. The GateCrashers sang "I'll Be There" by The Rembrandts, "On Top of the World" by Imagine Dragons, and "You'll Be in My Heart" by Phil Collins. The Gatecrashers showed off their a capella and sign language skills closing out the program with "This Little Light of Mine" and it was impressive!

Over \$26,000 was raised at DessertFest! The funds will be used for programming at the Gate. Thank you to all who support the Gate all throughout the year!



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## *DessertFest Preparations*

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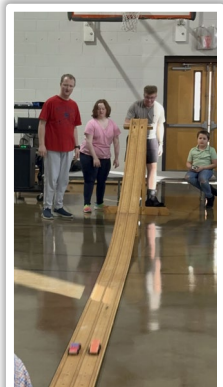
Preparations for DessertFest began in January when participants returned from winter break. They were busy making greeting cards, painting pictures, and creating custom pinecone art to sell at DessertFest. The Gatecrashers practiced their songs every week for almost two months. Participants put a lot of effort into memorizing the lyrics, practicing with an audio track and with Ed Harper's acoustic guitar accompaniment. Music is an integral part of the Gate's programming and participants really enjoy expressing themselves through various kinds of musical activities.

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## *A Visit from Park Rangers*

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The month of April started with a visit by Courtney and Seth from The Smoky Mountain National Park Service, bringing animal skulls and pelts. Groups played "detective," using clues from the animals' skulls to determine what each animal ate, if they were predator or prey, and ultimately what animal each skull belonged to. The rangers brought pelts from a bear, bobcat, beaver, coyote and a deer for participants to see and touch. It was a great educational and sensory experience!



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## *Pinewood Derby*

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Madison Avenue Baptist Church had their annual Pinewood Derby on April 29<sup>th</sup>. 14 Gate participants created, decorated and raced a car. Competition can get heated, and each race gets a little more heated. Our own Chase M. was runner up! Everyone enjoyed a nacho bar for supper and are already looking forward to next year's derby.

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## Aktion Club

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Gate participants have been busy all semester serving their community! We are so thankful for Chris Mahler and Holly Scarlett, Alcoa Kiwanis members, for supporting the Aktion Club of the Gate.

This semester we had the opportunity to serve the following organizations:

**January:** Painted rocks to hid in the community. (Top picture).

**February:** Made inspirational bracelets for middle school and high school guidance counselors. (Bottom picture).

**April:** Made Kruiser Kits with support goodies for school resource officers.

**May:** Made red poppies for Madison Avenue Baptist Church's veteran's remembrance service.



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## Favorite Activities

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There are several activities that are favorites among Gate participants and staff. We have so many exciting and enriching activities that exercise our participants' minds, bodies, and creativity.

Top left photo: Brad doing sand art

Top right photo: Group chair yoga

The Gate also does activities in recognition of various holidays throughout the calendar year. This year, participants did a Halloween scavenger hunt, made flowers for Mother's Day, and the bottom left photo shows Shawna and Eli making crafts for their Valentine's Day party.

We also do monthly activities to celebrate each participant and their birthday. Participants make birthday gift bags, eat pizza and cake and sing "Happy Birthday" to each other. The bottom right photo shows their favorite birthday party activity: Kyle is riding the bike while wearing the cape and crown.



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## Special Olympics Basketball

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On February 19<sup>th</sup>, four Gate basketball teams showcased their hard work! This was the first Special Olympics basketball competition held at Everett Gym, and we had so much fun!

The Gate had three Skills teams: The Lakers, Gate Globetrotters, and Gate Grizzlies. Our reigning champion 3-on-3 team, the Shaq Attack, also competed.

Shaq Attack and Gate Globetrotters both won the championship for their division! Great job, teams! Keep up the good work!

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## Special Olympics Track and Field

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One of The Gate's final big events of the program year is Special Olympics Track and Field competition, which was held on April 8<sup>th</sup> at Heritage High School. It was a perfect day for outdoor events! Athletes started the day with each participating group being celebrated as they were introduced as they walked across the football field. As the opening ceremonies began, Courtney B. was selected to sing the national anthem. Another long-time participant of the Gate, Robby E. was recognized as "Athlete of the Year." Participants competed in a variety of events including cornhole, softball toss, 400 meter walk, long jump and many more. The Gate is already looking forward to competing next year.

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## Interview with Alison Hodges, Gate volunteer

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**Where were you born?**

Georgia

**What college did you attend?**

University of Tennessee and Illinois  
State University

**What was your major in college?**

Anthropology: the study of people

**What was your profession?**

I was an archaeologist, so I got to dig  
in the dirt looking for artifacts.

**What is the most interesting thing  
you have ever found?**

A Spanish coin from 1770!

**Why did you want to volunteer at the  
Gate?**

The participants are fun, kind and they  
make me happy.

**What are some of your favorite  
things?**

**Color:** Blue

**Food:** babyback ribs

**Show:** "F.R.I.E.N.D.S."

**Movie:** *Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou?*

**Candy:** Butterfinger