

## First Ever 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Expo Celebration Displays Community at Its Finest in East Tennessee and Abroad



I can still remember talking to the local newspaper reporter at the very first Access-Life Expo we did in East Tennessee on Sunday, August 29, 2010. It was held at a marina on Douglas Lake and we had 389 attendees join us. The reporter asked me, "How does it feel to have nearly 400 people come out to this event for the disabled in your own home town?" At that point I don't really recall what I exactly said but I do remember feeling a sense of awe and amazement at all God had done to pull together this true community event through so many people, churches, and businesses.

This event was actually called "Fishing with Friends" that first year, but we realized folks needed to know it was about more than fishing so it became the Access-life Expo the following year. In 2015 the Expo had to move to Cherokee Lake due to its annual growth, and the growth has

continued each year reaching new counties and rural areas. Over the course of the last 10 years 7,134 attendees have joined these FREE four-hour events, and this year we had our highest count of 991 folks join us on August 17<sup>th</sup>!

Compared to our first outreach in East Tennessee, today there are so many more activities, organizations, and people involved than ever before. However, the heart of the East Tennessee Expo is still the community of people that come together by God's grace to make things a reality for all the individuals and families living with disabilities within the area. In fact, this year for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration we had 13 local churches, 11 area organizations and 12 regional businesses involved. There was a dunking booth, zip line, climbing wall, kayaks, boat rides, fishing, archery, airsoft, animals, games, art, crafts, popcorn, snow cones, cotton candy, exhibitors, lunch and more. You could even get your picture made with beauty queens. There was so much fun going on, it was almost impossible experience it all within the four hour time period. However, what really brought out the smiles, sense of joy, and feeling of peace seen on so many faces was the safe, friendly and wholesome atmosphere of a true community enjoying fellowship, fun - and of course food - together in God's great outdoors!



It is our hope and prayer that with God working through the hearts and minds of His people, each Expo will be a small slice of heaven on earth and unexplainably by His gracious presence, light, and love, He accomplishes that at each outreach. It is always a treat to see the smiles and excitement of participants and volunteers who have shared this experience together in the past, greeting each other with a high five or perhaps a hug. At this year's East Tennessee Expo this bond of community was especially seen at the top of the zip line tower as participants were getting ready for their fast trip to the ground. On several occasions the people walking by would stop and cheer on a hesitant participant at the top with shouts of encouragement, as well as cheers erupting when they conquered their doubts and landed at the bottom.



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