IN RODEO PARLANCE, A “PLAYDAY” IS AN EVENT FOR PEOPLE OF all ages, sizes and abilities. Playdays are meant to promote a family-friendly atmosphere that’s fun and supportive. Of course, horses are central to the events, and people attend to have a good time, whether participating or cheering on the sidelines.

Hooves and Halos, a Winnsboro nonprofit, hosts playdays twice a year and models its events after a longstanding tradition and purpose.

“Our target audience to begin with was special-needs kids,” said HH founder Johnette Poole. But as notoriety and support grew, the organization began hosting children under the care of advocacy centers, foster children, children with incarcerated parents, children and adults with special needs, and nursing home residents. “If they need us, they are invited,” Poole said.

Poole is a quiet and unassuming lady with lots of passion for horses—and an even bigger love of people. She grew up on a dairy farm in Mount Vernon, where she was the eldest of three siblings. “My daddy wanted a boy, so that’s why I was named Johnette,” she said.

Looking back, Poole said she never envisioned that Hooves and Halos’ playdays would grow to be a big event. In fact, when Hooves and Halos held its first event in 2014, just 17 guests and 100 volunteers attended. That’s about the size Poole anticipated when she named the event.

“The term ‘rodeo’ sounded so big to me, so I couldn’t name it that,” she said. “A playday is a little event where you get together and run barrels and things. It’s just fun and not serious.”

While HH’s playdays are still all about having fun, they’ve since grown to rodeo size, averaging 800 guests at both the spring and fall events. In fact, Poole joyfully refers to it as “controlled chaos on steroids!”

Poole has always treasured animals of all kinds. Her skills with horses led her to be named Mount Vernon Rodeo Queen in her teens. Growing up, she’d hoped to one day become a veterinarian, but as life unfolded, she became a nurse instead. She practiced for more than 30 years, working throughout the region at hospitals and in home health care. She spent much of that time as a pediatric nurse serving those with special needs.

Since 2017, Poole has been a ministry worker and a full-time farmer, working alongside her husband, Johnny. She believes that all of her past jobs—dairy farming, ranching, caregiving and ministering—and the lessons those jobs imparted prepared her to envision and carry out the playdays. She attrib-
utes the event’s success to its willing and able volunteers, who bring their own sets of talents. Jampacked and filled with glee, an HH playday starts at about 7:30 a.m. for the volunteers, who meet before the event for prayer and a few instructions. Group leaders and their team members then finalize setup and start greeting guests at about 9 a.m. When guests arrive and step out of their buses, they head to one of any number of activities. They can enjoy assisted horse rides, have their faces painted, take a turn on a mechanical bull, dance and sing to live music, enjoy a hayride, take a barrel train ride, and play all sorts of games. When all that gets to be too much, they can hang out in the quiet zone and color or visit the petting zoo to enjoy the calm nature of miniature horses and cows, rabbits, goats and ducklings. For lunch, there are hamburgers and hot dogs, chips, homemade cookies and bottled water with flavor packs. Playdays are free to all who attend, including guests, family members, caregivers, teachers and, of course, the volunteers. Everyone receives a T-shirt and food, and some lucky guests go home with prizes. Poole, like almost anyone, has lived through some tough patches. In those times, she often found solace in animals. She was particularly fond of a horse she drew comfort from in her younger years, which she called her “therapy animal.” “When life is hard, the Lord will send you an animal,” she said.

This philosophy—that animals can offer healing and comfort—is an integral part of the mission of Hooves and Halos and its playdays. But ultimately, Poole said, “Our mission is to love people—to find the ones that don’t have hope, don’t know that anybody loves them, don’t know that they matter, and to let them know they do matter. “But this is not all about the special-needs individuals or the troubled people,” she added. “This is also about giving people, including the volunteers, a special purpose.”

It takes a village to put on such a grand event. Poole gives credit to the many volunteers and financial backers of the playdays. “I would not have had the confidence or the strength to get it all together without the volunteers,” she said. As an example, she said, “I had a lady that made 20 dozen cookies. And there’s another that bakes 10 dozen every single event.” She gives special credit to Sam Clem, executive director of Running WJ Ranch, a therapeutic riding center in Texarkana. Poole said Clem’s encouragement was the catalyst for HH playdays. He shared with Poole his passion for therapeutic horse
riding. Before she left the ranch, she said, “Sam told me, ‘You’re going to do this one day!’ ”

Also crucial to HH, Poole said, is her husband of 19 years, Johnny, who has supported her dream every step of the way. She said none of it would have happened without him, whom she refers to as her chief officer in charge of labor—and her sanity officer when things get crazy. Poole runs her ideas by him, but many of the best ideas are his, she said. Previously a roustabout and now a farmer, Johnny earns his wife’s praises for his ability to fix or build just about anything that HH needs.

Poole also credited some of the organizations and businesses that routinely help, including the Winnsboro Rotary Club, city of Winnsboro, D&G Directional Drilling, Smyrna Baptist Church, Mount Pleasant Seventh-day Adventist, Ozarka, Wood County Electric Cooperative, Peoples Telephone Cooperative, Winnsboro Brookshire’s, Goudarzi and Young LLP, Starbucks of Longview and many others.

It costs HH about $20 per person to put on a playday, and about 98% of the costs are covered by donations. However, the events are free for every single participant.

“I tell people to just come see it and feel it,” Poole said. “You can look at the pictures or read the stories, but you can’t get the feeling unless you come. There are so many blessings to helping with this.”

If you want to earn your own small halo, acquire a special purpose, and be among folks and animals that already have those, then an HH playday is the place to be. Poole invites any business, nonprofit or church to set up a table with information or bring a game or snack.

The next playday is October 3 at Winnsboro City Park. Bring your smiles. You’re going to need them.

Hooves and Halos is a nonprofit entity. All money raised supports the playdays. For information on how to get involved, visit hoovesandhalos.org, call (903) 563-1449 or email johnette@hoovesandhalos.org.
THE EMPLOYEES, STAFF AND DIRECTORS OF WOOD COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE are looking forward to seeing members at the co-op’s annual meeting. Prior to the meeting, the public is invited to attend a concert by fun local band the Swoapes. Straight out of Golden, the family band will entertain with sweet harmonies and popular hits. They’ll also introduce the crowd to some of their originals.

Ballots for the election of directors for WCEC districts 5 and 6 were mailed this month. On the ballot are incumbents Cathy Roberts, vice president and District 5 director, and Jane Roberson, secretary-treasurer and District 6 director. The results of the election will be announced at the meeting.

Following the business meeting, there will be a raffle for WCEC members of prizes donated by our generous vendors.

We hope to see you at the annual meeting!