

RURAL EDUCATION

HOPE Races Through Small Mississippi Town



It's a sun-drenched Saturday in Houlka, Miss., following a week of rain. Activities abound in the grassy townhall square.

In the center of the square, men and women are participating in a cake walk, while beside them, children are playing hopscotch. A table topped with a beautiful quilt is set up nearby. The quilt was made especially for today's raffle by local quilter Juanita Chrestman. A recliner and a sofa beside the table also are raffle items, donated by local companies in this furniture-factory town.

A crowd stands three deep in front of a dunking machine. Other folks make their way to tables that sag under the weight of cakes, pies, homemade ice cream, hamburgers, and barbecue. Children on bicycles decorated with ribbons and balloons begin a colorful parade around the square. Both adults and children ready themselves for the 1-mile run.

Master of ceremonies Rick Huffman, who is both the mayor of Houlka and a disk jockey, is standing just outside the townhall. Martha Wilson, school secretary, stands behind him, handing out T-shirts emblazoned with "HOPE." Everyone in town knows what the letters stand for: Houlka Organization for Pupil Education.

HOPE is what this whole Norman Rockwell scene is about. The field day festivities are just another moneymaking venture for Houlka Atten-

dance Center in Chickasaw County. The school has 535 students, kindergarten through grade 12.

Houlka depends on its community for support. Residents of the town both young and old take part in today's event just as they do every time their school needs them.

And make no mistake—it is *their* school. Even Houlka citizens who have no children or grandchildren turn out to support the school.

Why? Perhaps middle school reading and English teacher Patsy Lusty, who is a native of Houlka, sums it up best: "The school keeps us bound together as community members."

Several years ago when kindergarten classes became mandatory, Houlka had no place for the extra children. HOPE met and raised \$5,000 the same night. Another \$10,000 was raised through activities like today's field day. The money paid for materials for converting the auditorium into kindergarten classrooms. Parents and teachers supplied the long, hard hours of labor.

"If you don't have the participating people, you don't have anything," says Wayne Buchanan, president of the Chickasaw County School Board. Buchanan should know; he has done his part on the school board for the past 29 years.

The Houlka children consistently score well on all the achievement tests each year. And with satellite technology, Houlka children are able to take "luxury" courses such as Jap-

anese and probability and statistics.

Houlka was one of four Mississippi schools chosen to pilot the U.S. Department of Education's STAR satellite program during 1988-89. (See "Dishing Up Knowledge to Rural Schoolchildren," November 1989.)

One of those STAR students, Houlka senior Albert Moore, Jr., introduced himself in Japanese when he testified about the benefits of the technology for rural children. He spoke first before a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate in Jackson, Miss., and then before a committee of the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.

Moore plans to major in mathematics in college, partly because of his satellite course experience.

"Another community in our county lost its school," says Pat Hill, a former teacher and current editor of the local newspaper.

In an editorial on the subject, Hill wrote: "Houlkians stood together with their feet planted on solid ground and said, 'No!' Houlkians stood, joined hands and hearts, donated, had fund-raisers, and impressed the outside world with their determination to keep Houlka School. And keep it they did."

Patsy Lusty concurs with the editorial. "We probably had one of the smallest enrollments around," she says. "But I think we weren't consolidated when the push was on simply because of the work that they saw going on."



Each of the participants in this 1-mile run pay \$3 all for the benefit of the Houlka school.



Patsy Lusty (above, left) hawks cakes the same way she teaches—enthusiastically. Thanks to a grant, every math student (above, right) at Houlka receives a calculator.

Being able to generate enthusiasm is a useful skill at any rural school. So is a knack for money-scrouring. Superintendent of Education Raymond Paden's know-how is credited at Houlka for the number of grants the school has been awarded.

For instance, the school received a grant to help put into place new standards set by the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics. Now, every child taking a mathematics course at Houlka has a course-appropriate calculator.

Tools are only as good as the teachers who use them, however.

And Houlka is filled with dedicated teachers. Lusty taught elementary and junior high English in Biloxi, Miss., and in Atlanta and Columbus, Ga., during her 29-year career before returning to teach in her hometown of Houlka.

There's no question which she prefers. "In Atlanta, I had 38 to 40 students in each of my classes," she says. It was hard to make each one feel special.

"At Houlka, every child has a chance to make his mark in this school," Lusty says. She plans to retire in Houlka.

But even with hardworking teachers, administrators, and technology, Houlka's most crucial problem is hard cash, as it is for most rural schools. And for many of these schools, the immediate financial need is to update facilities.

The school at Houlka has two main buildings—one is 30 years old, the other, 50. It also has several 20-year-old trailers—trailers that are supposed to last 10 years.

"We're using state money to add on to the lunchroom and to renovate the elementary school," Paden says. But that money can't be stretched for new construction, so the local folks must fund new facilities.

Many of Houlka's residents fall below the poverty line and have children who are dependent on the federally funded breakfast and lunch program.

Still, last fall, the school called on the community to fund an eight-classroom building for grades five through eight, allowing all the children to move out of the dilapidated trailers. HOPE raised the money without a bond issue.

A 5,000-square-foot addition also will be built with money from a 3-mill levy on property taxes.

It seems that every time the school has a crisis and calls on the community members, they always come through. HOPE is always there for rural education in Houlka, Miss.

By NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON with photos by VANN CLEVELAND