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Family turns profit on fast food

By: Peter Jones , Staff Writer

The Reddick family's weekly jaunts to McDonald's have become a family tradition. Even so, the Centennial household has taken "junk food" to another level.

In the Reddicks' home, Happy Meal toys - the sort discarded from a crumb-filled backseat during a car wash - are tucked away, secured in plastic bags and stored in air-tight tubs. The Ronald McDonald and "Hamburgler" figures are not relics of the family's Wednesday visits to the fast-food haven, but are "mint in the package," never touched by 14-year-old Holly Reddick.

"She wished she could have opened them all. She hated that," her mother, Karen, said. "When we get them, she's like, 'Can I open it or do I have to save it?' We just know from Grandma that we don't open anything because it's worth money."

The iron-willed matriarch of the clan is 70-year-old Donna Dulinsky of Toledo, Ohio. The family tradition of harboring Happy Meal trinkets started in the late 1980s when Dulinsky began a decade's stint as a hostess and table cleaner at a string of McDonald's. It was not fast-food's modest wages that attracted her to the golden arches. Dulinsky was after the M Squad walkie-talkies, the Daffy Duck sports cars and the other novelties tucked into Happy Meal boxes.

Reddick respectfully admits her mother is something of a pack rat - albeit a skilled one with a nose for memorabilia futures. For decades, Dulinsky cruised flea markets, garage sales and junk stores amassing the odd knick-knack or old promotional item at rock-bottom prices. The resulting stock seems like "junk" to some, but for Dulinsky, the collection constituted well-timed investments in a self-styled portfolio.

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"Everybody in the family is just fascinated by the stuff she has - Charlie Tuna umbrellas, anything that's about advertising - Campbell's, Nabisco," Karen Reddick said. "Everything she has is mint in the package and never opened. She has a basement full. She has an attic full. She even had to buy a bigger house to put all her stuff in."

Dulinsky's Toledo living room and kitchen are a shrine to social history. Hundreds of cookie jars and snow globes line the shelves and mantles.

Her side trip into McDonaldland was a way to pass the "wealth" on to her three grandchildren, if they could keep their hands off the Witchie McNugget toys and Earth Day binoculars for the first few decades. The idea was that the kids would one day sell the collectibles and make tons of money, presuming they had any interest in doing so.

They didn't - and still don't. The grandchildren, ages 14 to 24, are more engrossed by iPods and campus life than by the prospect of marketing Grandma's accumulation.

That's where Reddick came in.

"It came to a point where nobody wanted to do anything about it," she said. "My brother's family in Toledo was like, 'Let's have a big garage sale and give it away.' That was freaking my mom out because she knows these things are worth money. It wouldn't be good for my mom, even if she was gone. She has worked so hard on collecting. It's what she loves to do. It would be wrong."

Two years ago, Reddick agreed to have about 10 percent of her mother's 460 Happy Meal sets - or 10,761 individual toys - shipped to Colorado. The rest of the collection remains in Toledo, safely stored under Dulinsky's watchful eye.

Reddick describes business at her Web site, junkloverjunk.com, as "slow, but steady," leaving plenty of time for her home-based business. She will be featured later this month in a story about "virtual office assistants" on NBC's "Today Show."

Thus far, Reddick has shipped the distinctly American collectibles as far as England, Australia and Japan. Prices are set strictly by the McDonald's Illustrated Price Guide. The items - many sold in original sets - sell between \$10 and \$100, mostly to buyers who have stumbled upon the site. Reddick has raised about \$2,000 on McMerchandise and another \$20,000 by clearing out some of her mother's other sundries.



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Holly Reddick, 14, sits with a fraction of McDonald's toys her grandmother collected from 1989 to 1998. The items are for sale at a Web site.

"These little trinkets that we think are worth nothing - people want them," she said. "People have one or two things from a campaign, but they don't have the whole set."

For example, while an empty-nester might be able to rustle up a McDonald's Crew Barbie Doll during an attic spring cleaning, he is unlikely to also muster an Awesome Skateboard Stacie toy from the same Happy Meal promotion.

Although old McDonald's toys do not move as quickly as the hamburgers that once accompanied them, Reddick believes she is making progress. In the meantime, she has discovered a whole subculture of other offspring in similar predicaments. Many of them have made unwelcome offers to super-size her collection.

"A lot of the e-mails I get are from daughters or sons, stating my mom collected all this stuff or my dad had a garage full of stuff. We need to get rid of it? Do you buy? But the answer is no, we're not buying anymore!" Reddick said.

The Centennial seller often responds with polite, autobiographical advice - "Go to eBay, start a Web site, join the McDonald's Collector's Club."

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