Toy rescue operation gives new life to old playthings

by Gabriel H. Gluck/The Star-Ledger
Saturday December 06, 2008, 2:00 PM

Bronna Lipton, mother of Sasha Lipton, the founder of Second Chance Toys, shows off some of the 10,000 toys that have been collected.

It was one of those spring days when suburban homeowners purge their attics and basements and garages of all things unwanted, unneeded and outgrown.

But on this particular morning two years ago, Sasha Lipton was in the car with her mother, Bronna, driving through their Mountainside neighborhood. Sasha, then 15, was struck by the overwhelming number of toys tossed into the trash, toys that appeared to be in very good condition, but were destined for a landfill.

That's when the idea hit her: What if those toys could be cleaned up and given to other children?

Second Chance Toys was born and this week, with the help of a growing army of volunteers, the 10,000th toy was brought to the Family Violence Center in Newark, the first agency to receive the initial batch of toys the Liptons collected.

With the help of the internet, secondchancetoys.org is spreading the message to other states with hopes the effort will soon be nationwide, Bronna Lipton said. There are already similar toy drives in New York City, Chicago and Bucks County, Pa.

Just last week, students at Evergreen Elementary School in Scotch Plains, where Lipton teaches, collected 450 toys that were donated to Union County Social Services.
This year, Investor Savings Bank -- its 52 branches scattered across Essex, Hunterdon, Morris, Middlesex, Monmouth, Ocean, Somerset, Union, and Warren counties -- signed on, providing even more locations for toys to be dropped off.

The collection is running through Tuesday, with volunteers from the trash removal company 1-800-GOT-JUNK? fanning out the next day to collect from the banks what are expected to be hundreds of toys for youngsters across New Jersey.

Now a freshman at Northwestern University in Illinois, Sasha is still amazed at how the idea has taken off.

"I didn't expect it at all. I thought it would be one toy drive and that would be it," said Sasha, who still isn't quite sure what it was about that spring day that got her thinking. "I guess just noticing all the toys and just realizing the toys just looked so new, that they should not be heading to landfills -- they should be heading to kids who could use them."

Her mother said it only took a few minutes before their SUV was packed with toys, which they brought home and went back out for more.

"In five minutes, my car was loaded up with unbelievable toys -- a $99 doll house that folds out with a front porch and that some little girl is enjoying it now," she said.

"We had hundreds of toys in our basement and they were all destined for a landfill. But they looked good as new," Lipton said.

Their efforts have become so popular that they are now planning to have two collections a year, one around Thanksgiving and the other in the spring.

"We wanted to do one during Earth Week, when people are doing spring cleaning, and around Thanksgiving when people are thinking about giving and buying new toys," Lipton said, noting that it is not unusual for people to donate some fairly expensive toys that their children have simply outgrown.

"There really is a need this year," Lipton said. "But the toys must be clean, with no small or missing parts."

Electronic and mechanical toys should be fully functional, she said, requesting that any toys requiring batteries be donated with a set of batteries so that the toy works when it is given to a youngster.

"With Sasha away at school, coordinating Second Chance Toys has become a second job, " Lipton said.
Meanwhile, her daughter, who spoke at a recent conference in Chicago where more toys were donated, tries to help whenever she can.

"The fact that it was my idea and that other people want to be a part of it is a good feeling," Sasha said.