

San Jose Mercury News

FAMILY USES A LOT OF CENTS TO HELP COMBAT AIDS

December 2, 2006

Section: Local

Edition: Morning Final

Page: 6B

BARBARA FEDER OSTROV, Mercury News

Memo: IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The pennies will be exhibited today from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at 1135 O'Brien Drive in Menlo Park. For more information or to donate, visit www.gotcents.org

Laid out in a single layer, the 2,759,811 pennies the Johnsons have collected to raise awareness for HIV/AIDS would cover three acres.

Instead, the Menlo Park family has poured them onto the floor of a local warehouse in the shape of a giant AIDS ribbon. It's their way of marking World AIDS Day -- and the end of 21 months of penny collecting.

"It's to try to give people a sense of the magnitude" of the AIDS crisis in Africa, says Todd Johnson, a corporate lawyer who views the effort as a spiritual journey.

The seven-ton ribbon is just part of the hubbub this week at the Menlo Park warehouse, where volunteers are assembling supply kits for people caring for AIDS patients in Africa.

Johnson started the venture after his pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church gave him a \$100 bill and told him to do God's work with it. The original goal was to collect 25.4 million pennies -- one for every person estimated to have died of AIDS in Africa through 2004.

Some \$27,000 later, after the pennies' weight started cracking Johnson's garage floor, he, his wife, Lil, and teenage daughters Sara and Emily cashed them in at a local bank. When it came time to create the exhibit, the Johnsons asked for their money back -- in pennies. A Brink's truck delivered them to the warehouse.

Through a Web site the family set up, gotcents.org, people from 25 states, from preschoolers to cafe habitues, have contributed pennies. A penny, Johnson says, is a perfect metaphor for AIDS in Africa -- something of little worth, easily forgotten. After today, the \$27,000-plus he's raised will be donated to efforts serving AIDS orphans in Africa.

Illustration: Photo

Caption: PHOTO: MARIA J. AVILA -- MERCURY NEWS

Anne Blaha, 10, of Los Altos reads the years on a few of the nearly 3 million pennies in a Menlo Park warehouse. The Johnson family of Menlo Park collected the money to raise HIV/AIDS awareness.