When Rick and Joellen Schlereth moved from Port Washington to the Town of Holland and converted their summer home into a year-round abode, they installed a floor-to-ceiling glass cabinet along the wall of their loft to display a collection that would warm Ronald McDonald's heart.

But it doesn't begin to hold the thousands of McDonald's Happy Meal toys that Joellen has been collecting since the early 1990s.

She not only collects the toys included in children's meals, she also saves the boxes and bags they come in and other memorabilia the restaurant chain created to promote Disney, Star Wars and other popular characters.

The small toys led her to want larger McDonald's toys, dishes and other memorabilia, and now she has bins of those also.

She even has a McDonald's employee T-shirt that a friend found at a second-hand shop.

"In my heart, I'm a kid yet," Schlereth said as she showed off a portion of her voluminous collection.

"These are my favorites — the under-3 toys.

"Did I eat all these Happy Meals? No, I did not. In the early '90s, I could go to Goodwill in Sheboygan and they had five bins of toys for five cents each. I could spend $5 and come home with a huge bag of toys. I got most of them at garage sales and second-hand stores."

It hurt her to pay $8 on eBay for a Belle figurine to complete her "100 Years of Magic" Disney Happy Meal collection, which is displayed in the case.

It will cost even more as she attempts to collect those issued in 1979, the first year Happy Meal toys were distributed. For a year or two prior to that, McDonald's experimented with giving stickers to its young patrons, Schlereth said. She has a few of those.

Some of the early toys were distributed regionally, and those are expensive.

“I’m hoping to find people to trade with,” said Schlereth, who keeps track of her collection in a database.

She strives to collect two of each toy — one that’s loose and one in the original wrapper, which is safely stored.

“The loose ones are my preference because I can display them, but they say resale is better in the original package,” Schlereth said.

Information about the loose ones are kept on white paper and information on those in original wrappers are on green paper, so she can easily find what she needs. She also notes if the toy came with accessories and if she has them.

She takes the book with her when she travels because she usually stops at garage sales or second-hand stores to see if she can add to her collection.

She has a bottle of McDonald’s ketchup that she bought in Germany.

Schlereth has unopened McDonald’s Monopoly pieces — “I could be a winner and not know it,” she said — and had kept Happy Meal boxes and bags when her children, Anne and David, now in their 20s, got the meals.

Her husband didn’t think the boxes were important and tossed them out.

Some toys, such as Inspector Gadget and Captain Hook’s pirate ship, came in pieces and were assembled when all the parts were collected.

Her favorite Happy Meal toys are Madame Alexander dolls.

“I’m amazed with the intricacies of some of the toys. Their eyes open and close and they have these little dresses,” Schlereth said.

She has Halloween trick-or-treat coupons as well as holiday ones and even some unopened McDonald’s cookies.

The couple’s drinking glasses are from McDonald’s.

“We decided to use them rather than save them,” Schlereth said.

In 2011, when she retired as a first-grade teacher at Lincoln Elementary School in Port Washington after 38 years in the Port-Saukville School District, Schlereth decided to end her collection with toys produced and distributed that year.

She’s no longer tempted to buy a Happy Meal for the current toy, but she’s always looking to add to her collection with earlier toys and memorabilia.

Schlereth became intrigued with collecting toys after reading an article about the McDonald's Collector's Club. She joined the club in 1992 and went to three of its annual conventions in Chicago.

She and her husband met people who were even crazier about collecting McDonald's items than she is.

"You went from room to room and found things like lighted menu boards that you couldn't find at garage sales," Schlereth said. "I had Ronald McDonald displays then."

She stopped going to conventions when they were held in other states, but now that she's retired she may attend one in May in Ohio.

She subscribes to McDonald's Collecting Tips Newsletter, which is published monthly and lists the hottest new and old toys, and has numerous books on collecting the memorabilia.

The Happy Meal toys that got her hooked were the Berenstein Bears.

"I loved the Berenstein Bears books and read them to my students," Schlereth said.

"It was a great way for me to keep in touch with the kids. They would be talking about the latest Disney movie and Happy Meal toys and I would know what they were."

Schlereth kept a treasure box with duplicate toys at school to reward students.

"It was for behavioral things. If they did their homework four out of five days, they could pick a toy from the treasure box," she said.

She also has a large bin of toys at her home that children can play with, including ones for children under age 3.

Schlereth said her love of the toys doesn't mean she endorses the fast-food chain's food.

Her favorite menu items are the classic chicken sandwich and the Southwest chicken salad.

"But I joined Weight Watchers a year ago and don't go there anymore," Schlereth said.

"I can have one-half of a hamburger and one-half of a French fry (under her Weight Watchers diet)."

Image Information: Joellen Schlereth, holding empty Happy Meal boxes, stood in front of a glass display case that holds a small fraction of her McDonald's collection. Photo by Sam Arendt