

Black market exists for children's lost comfort items

February 2 2009, By Valerie Schremp Hahn

Any mommy and daddy whose child has lost a favorite blanket or stuffed animal knows the lengths they will go to make everything better again. But parents often are powerless, because the well-worn blankie their child loves most is no longer found in stores.

Enter the blankie black market.

Numerous eBay sellers, keen to the desperation of parents, are marking up prices - some drastically - on blankets and stuffed toys no longer stocked on store shelves. The sellers are snagging up discontinued lovies, knowing that one day, some desperate parent may want them.

Just check out one recent posting of a Carter's brand blanket sprinkled with pink flowers. The seller gave it a "buy it now" price of \$54.88.

"Please do not e-mail asking why the price of this is high," the seller writes on the description notes. "It is priced high because it is nearly impossible to find except on eBay."

KiYoshi Ankoviak, 7, of south St. Louis County, and Woobie, a pink stuffed bear, have been inseparable since the day KiYoshi was born.

Woobie's been lost forever a few times, and reincarnated a few times, because her parents, Rick and Michelle, managed to find replacements at department and thrift stores.

But when Woobie went missing sometime around Thanksgiving, the Ankoviaks figured this was the end. Of Woobie. For good.

KiYoshi was heartbroken. She couldn't sleep. She teared up at television commercials featuring anything cute and fluffy. She didn't want toys for Christmas, because none of them would be as good as Woobie.

"It wasn't like she was this bratty kid who was just pouting about her toy," Michelle Ankoviak says. "This is like her best friend in the whole world. To her, this is like a death in the family."

So Michelle Ankoviak made a desperate search on eBay, wading through offers of similar Woobies for \$50 each, and managed to find a Woobie match for \$16.99.

"I kind of thought, thank God there's one for \$16 because I would have spent fifty," she said.

With a simple search on eBay, you can find numerous stores from across the country with names like "Loveys and More" and "Woobie World."

Jenny Collins of Richland, Mo., sells blankies from her online store, The Sugar Beans Closet. When her 4-year-old daughter, Jaidyn, was about 2, they lost her beloved "bear," a stuffed bear head with a pink blanket attached to it. Collins found a replacement on eBay for about \$20. A light clicked on in her brain. Thus began her descent into the blankie black market.

Her prices range from about \$9 to \$25, and she'll take best offers on some items.

"I know that some parents will go to all ends to get stuff," she said. "I can understand being frustrated. I've been there as a buyer, going, 'Oh,

my God.' If that's my child's security thing, I will pay for it. And if I don't like the price, I'll move on."

On several occasions, Collins has overnighted blankies to desperate parents. They later sent grateful e-mails, saying everyone in the house was sleeping again.

Debbie Martin of Imperial, Mo., specializes in lovies in her eBay store, Mary Jane's Attic Toys and Treasures. Most of her prices range from \$15 to \$30, and she also will take best offers.

"You don't want to extort anyone, but what you're doing is you're spending your time looking for these things," said Martin, who, like Collins, looks for lovies at yard sales and thrift stores. "It's just like any other business."

Last year, she found a stuffed snowman for a dollar at a thrift store, and put it online for auction. At the end, two bidders fought over it. It finally sold for \$101 to a mother in Taiwan. The woman's 4-year-old lost one just like it the week before, and she was desperate to replace it.

But the Internet black market isn't all about commerce.

The site Plush Memories Lost Toy Search Service, at plushsearch.dirtybutter.com, specializes in connecting people with lost lovies and blankies.

The service sells replacements for reasonable prices. Parents write pleading listings and post sad stuffed animal mugshots as if they've lost their own children. If browsers happen to own a match, they can send it to the desperate family just because they want to help, often at no cost.

Of all the frantic parents shopping the blankie black market, Susan and

Michael Allman of west St. Louis County may have faced one of the more peculiar situations.

When the couple adopted their daughter Mina from China, she came with three thin washcloths she loved to hold close while she sucked her thumb. The Allmans searched the local Chinese markets and bought 10 similar "bitties" as backups.

Fast forward a couple years _ the stash was depleting, and the Allmans started panicking. Susan turned to eBay, and has since bought about 30 more "bitties" for now 4-year-old Mina for a couple bucks apiece. They shipped here all the way from China.

What would Susan do without eBay? "I'd be sunk," she said.

As for Woobie, KiYoshi was a bit skeptical when she opened the specially marked package ("Attention KiYoshi, From Woobie") that mysteriously appeared on the front porch.

"Well ... ," KiYoshi told her parents. "I don't know if this is mine. It's not dirty."

"You know," her mom said. "It's like when grandma and grandpa go away on a cruise. They go looking kind of tired, kind of pale. When they get back, they have tans, grandma has her nails done ... "

KiYoshi bought it. Woobie just went on a little getaway.

Now, KiYoshi and Woobie are tighter than ever.

Since then, Michelle Ankoviak has done a bit more eBay shopping, and for \$20 she found the perfect accessory for Woobie, which she pinned to its chest: an electronic tracking device.

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