A $10 Mosquito Net Is Making Charity Cool

By DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.

Donating $10 to buy a mosquito net to save an African child from malaria has become a hip way to show you care, especially for teenagers. The movement is like a modern version of the March of Dimes, created in 1938 to defeat polio, or like collecting pennies for Unicef on Halloween.

Unusual allies, like the Methodist and Lutheran Churches, the National Basketball Association and the United Nations Foundation, are stoking the passion for nets that prevent malaria. The annual “American Idol Gives Back” fund-raising television special has donated about $6 million a year for two years. The music channel VH1 made a fund-raising video featuring a pesky man in a mosquito suit.

It is an appeal that clearly resonates with young people.

Addressing a conference of 6,000 Methodist youths in North Carolina last year, Bishop Thomas Bickerton held up his own $10 and told the crowd: “This represents your lunch today at McDonald’s or your pizza tonight from Domino’s. Or you could save a human life.”

The lights were so bright that he could see only what was happening at his feet. “They just showered the stage with $10 bills,” Bishop Bickerton said. “In 30 seconds, we had $16,000. I’m just lucky they didn’t throw coins.”

Part of what has helped the campaign catch on is its sheer simplicity and affordability — $10 buys one net to save a child. Nothing But Nets, the best-known campaign, has raised $20 million from 70,000 individuals, most of it in donations averaging $60.

That is a small fraction of the overall need, which experts estimate at $2.5 billion. But it gives the effort a populist edge, and participation is psychologically rewarding for anyone whose philanthropic pockets are shallower than those of Bill Gates.

“The first time I donated money, after my bar mitzvah, it was for someone who needed a heart transplant,” said Daniel Fogel, 18, a founder of his Waltham, Mass., high school’s juggling club, which raised $2,353 for nets last year. “But I had the feeling: Am I really helping? But if you can say $10 saves a life, that makes students feel they can help a lot. And every student has $10.”

Emily Renzelli of West Virginia University learned about malaria on a trip to South Africa. She raised about $1,000 through bake sales and parties where students were snagged in nets and not released until they recited facts about malaria.

Naomi Levine, an expert on philanthropy at New York University, said young people “more than ever want to
do something.”

“You won’t find them giving money to research,” she added. “It’s too far off. But a net is something you can hold in your hand. And any time young people get interested in any form of philanthropy, it’s a good thing.”

Crucial to the drive against malaria, which kills an estimated one million people a year, mostly in Africa, has been the development of an inexpensive, long-lasting insecticidal net. Unlike old nets, which either had no insecticide or had to be dipped twice a year, the new ones keep killing or repelling mosquitoes for three to five years. When more than 60 percent of the inhabitants of a village use them over their beds while they are sleeping, malaria rates usually drop sharply.

Major donors have focused on malaria since the creation in 2001 of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which has paid for 106 million nets. President Bush in 2005 started the President’s Malaria Initiative, which has bought 6 million so far.

The Gates Foundation has spent almost $1.2 billion on malaria, and although most goes toward research into vaccines and new drugs, part went to match the first $3 million raised by Nothing But Nets.

Although in recent years a welter of malaria campaigns has sprung up worldwide, participation in the United States was anemic until two years ago when Rick Reilly, then the back-page columnist for Sports Illustrated, took his daughter to Venice.

Exhausted from shopping, he said in a recent interview, he returned alone to their hotel. Idly channel-surfing, he stumbled onto a BBC documentary about malaria in Africa. Imitating a British accent, he said: “Up to 3,000 children die needlessly each day of malaria — and all they need is a net.”

“I thought, ‘That’s a column,’” he said. “Sports is nothing but nets — basketball nets, tennis nets, soccer nets, lacrosse nets, jumping the net, cutting down nets, the New Jersey Nets, girls in fishnets, whatever ... .”

Before asking his readers to donate $10 or $20, he searched for an agency to collect the money and buy the nets. He found the United Nations Foundation, which was started in 1998 by Ted Turner. Although it was already sponsoring another campaign, Malaria No More, it agreed to his request that a new group be started with the name Nothing But Nets. “That’s a real title,” Mr. Reilly said. “It’s so simple that even sports fans can get it.”

The foundation put a donation form on its Web site and promised to cover all administrative costs. Within a few days, $1.6 million had flowed in.

Soon after, Major League Soccer and the National Basketball Association became sponsors.

Players like Diego Gutierrez of the Chicago Fire and DeSagana Diop of the New Jersey Nets, who is from Senegal, helped raise money and traveled to Africa to hand out nets.

The United Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church and the Union for Reform Judaism also joined the effort, as did corporate sponsors like Orkin Pest Control and Makita tools.
The two Protestant churches pledged to raise up to $100 million each. They organize youth basketball tournaments and ask for money from their own adherents. For example, Bishop Bickerton said, at the Methodist general conference in April, a basketball signed by all the church’s bishops was auctioned off for $430,000.

But most of the contributions have been modest, raised by students.

Yoni D. P. Rechtman, a seventh grader on the undefeated middle-school team at St. Ann’s School in Brooklyn, organized a 3-on-3 basketball tournament as part of his “mitzvah project,” the tradition of raising money for a good cause before one’s bar mitzvah. Unfortunately, he said, it rained that day; but the nine players who showed up anyway had family pledges totaling $1,900.

At Howard University in Washington, Ololade Ajayi helped organize the African Student Association fashion show to raise $2,300. She had a personal interest, she said, because she caught malaria several times growing up in Nigeria and lost a friend to it.

“We had to take our own nets to boarding school,” she said. “There were stagnant water pools on the school grounds. If your net got holes in it, you’d be bitten.”

But the champion for her age and weight class is undoubtedly Katherine Commale of Hopewell, Pa., who has just turned 7 and has raised $43,000.

Her mother, Lynda Commale, said it started in April 2006 when she was watching television while the family slept and learned from a PBS documentary that a child died of malaria every 30 seconds.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Ms. Commale said. “The next morning, the kids said, ‘Mom, what’s wrong with you?’ I told them — and Katherine was just 5, and she started counting on her fingers. She got to 30, and she looked horrified. And she said ‘Mommy, we have to do something.’ ”

With her 3-year-old brother, Katherine built a diorama from a pizza box and some Barbie dolls to represent an African family in a hut. Then, with a piece of tulle and a toy bug, she developed a short skit showing how nets protect sleeping children.

“She tucks it in, she says, ‘You’re safe now,’ ” Ms. Commale said. “Kids get this in like 90 seconds.”

Soon, she and Katherine made a presentation at their church and raised $2,000, and they have continued visiting churches. Katherine and her friends also hand-decorate gift cards (which can be ordered at lyndacommale@yahoo.com) that say, “A mosquito net has been purchased in your name.” They have raised about $8,000 each Christmas, Ms. Commale said.