



Jeremy Wadsworth / Special to The Detroit News

After sending out pictures of her dressed-up dog as Christmas cards, photographer Madalyn Ruggiero was persuaded to market them.

Local spotlight

Canine cards fetch laughs, sales

■ Pictures of dressed-up dog draw fans as more stores sign up to sell humorous greetings.

BY ALEXA STANARD
Special to *The Detroit News*

Need to express a special sentiment to someone? Consider allowing Denali the dog to communicate on your behalf.

Madalyn Ruggiero, an Ohio-based freelance photographer whose work appears frequently in Metro Detroit publications, has launched a line of greeting cards featuring her golden retriever, Denali, in assorted outlandish costumes.

Twenty stores in five states now sell the cards emblazoned with images of the unflappable-looking dog in such guises as a nun, a Christmas present and an elderly woman.

"I'm flying by the seat of my pants," Ruggiero said of her business. "But if my cards make people smile, make people laugh, it's worth it."

Ruggiero started making the

Denali the Dog

■ Owner:
Madalyn Ruggiero

■ Visit
www.denalithedog.com



cards to send as Christmas greetings in 2001, after getting Denali in October. She took Denali to a studio, wrapped a red bow around his neck and snapped his picture.

"It was very simple," Ruggiero said. "I would do yearly cards. Sometimes I would dress him in goggles, or something. After a while, my family and friends told me I had to do something with it."

The picture that sealed Denali's photogenic appeal for Ruggiero's loved ones was her 2006 Christmas card of the retriever wrapped in a gift box. It took a

week to coax Denali into the box, but eventually he consented. The result persuaded Ruggiero to start looking for ways to sell the cards, which now number about 15 styles.

Her ex-boyfriend used to come up with the inside words; now she gets journalist friends and family members to submit ideas, which she then sends around for feedback.

It can be tough getting the cards picked up by stores, Ruggiero said. She and Denali recently took a road trip through New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland where, she said, "I had a lot of doors closed in my face."

But her persistence is paying off. A Maryland shop picked up the Denali line during her road trip. Others have come through a combination of foresight and strange luck: After breaking down in downtown Rochester while on a freelance assignment,

Ruggiero killed time by taking a pack of her cards, which she always keeps on her, into Lytle Pharmacy on Main Street. The store picked them up.

"She must be advertising, because people ask for them," said pharmacy manager Mary Preston. "Either that or she has a following. They're cute and unique. We carry other pet cards, and they're all photos, but the animals aren't dressed up in goofy costumes."

The cards are also sold at Three Dog Bakery in Plymouth, where Ruggiero and Denali will appear from 2-4 p.m. Saturday.

Getting Denali gussied up in silly costumes and photographed can sometimes be a challenge, Ruggiero said, but in the end he's a good sport.

"Ever since I've had him I've always taken his picture," she said. "It's a process, it's taken time. But he works with me. He doesn't care as long as you give him lots of love."

Alexa Stanard is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.