

SANTA PAWS

For **Madalyn Ruggiero**, Christmas is a time for breaking out the camera—and puttin' on the dog!



I started with a puppy and a homemade Christmas card. Madalyn Ruggiero adopted Denali, a Golden Retriever who was the smallest of his litter, in October 2001. That first Christmas, she put a ribbon on his collar, added reindeer antlers, and sat him in a gift box. She snapped a few pictures, which quickly morphed into cards bearing the caption, "Delivery is always an issue," and sent them to select friends.

And thus began a Christmas tradition. Each year Denali's costumes became a bit more eccentric and a bit more elaborate—and Madalyn's mailing list got a bit longer.

But Denali is more than just a Yule dog; he's a year-round target of opportunity for Madalyn's camera. Take, for instance, the time he looked up at Madalyn and turned his head just slightly to one side, in a way that reminded her of...Elvis.

Inspired, she grabbed a white suit jacket (extra-small) from her closet, a pair of cheap sunglasses, and a pompadour wig. By the time she'd finished dressing and primping him, Denali wasn't impersonating Elvis; he was Elvis—although still nothing but, you know, a hound dog.

In his various guises—Elvis, Uncle Sam, Ruggly Ann, a blue-haired lady, and so on—Denali now stars on all of the Denali the Dog greeting cards, available in card shops and online (denalithedog.com).

"I can be having the worst day," says 35-year-old Madalyn, "but when I come home and see my dog—I'm just on top of the world. So I started thinking: Maybe Denali can make other people feel that way too."

Having been a news photographer for the *Detroit Free Press*, *Detroit News*, and the *Associated Press*, Madalyn, who lives in Maumee, Ohio, also believed she had the experience to make that happen.

And one day in mid-2007, when she and Denali stumbled onto a small dog-lover's boutique in Harrisburg, Ohio, she got that chance. Because she happened to have a few of her cards in tow, Madalyn seized the moment, headed inside—and made her first sale.

It takes Madalyn about a month to go from inspiration—"Elvis!"—to envelope. Family closets and local thrift stores are raided for the wardrobe. Then come the photo shoots, which can go on for weeks. "I work on Denali's schedule," Madalyn explains. "I play some music and make some coffee. He has to be in the mood; keeping lots of doggie treats on hand is helpful."

Only when she feels the perfect expression has been captured does she pass the image around to family and friends, who suggest captions. The Elvis card, for instance, bears the inscription, "Thank you... Thank you very much."

Since her start three years ago, Madalyn has designed 23 cards (one for every occasion) bearing Denali's image, and a 24th is on the way. "The simple things in life can mean the most," she says. "My cards are simple; my designs come from the heart. Denali is just a sweet, lovable, huggable dog—though some days his breath smells."

"But," she quickly adds, "I'd be lost without him." ●



BY RICK MARKHAM