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Card crafter uses creativity to carve out niche

By Lorrie Grant, USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Greeting-card maker Karen Mitchell-Raptakis lacks the financial might of institutions Hallmark and American Greetings but not the passion to be just as big.



Karen Mitchell-Raptakis displays greeting cards at Sacred Thoughts in Jersey City.

By Todd Plitt, USA TODAY

Raptakis, a book-publishing assistant by day, is a new voice in the \$7.5-billion greeting-card business, specializing in the fast-growing ethnic card genre.

Karen & Co. Greeting Cards publishes both humorous and sentimental cards, with forthright messages steeped in nostalgia and executed in bold colors.

Her tips for entrepreneurs

- Absolutely love what you do, or it won't work. "This business is not making money yet, but I am determined to give it my best shot. Greeting cards are my passion."
- Be comfortable with rejection. "Other businesses don't take you seriously when you're starting out."
- Listen to the little voice inside. "It will say, 'Go this way,' even when the people closest to you may be saying, 'Go the other way.'"
- Know the industry you're getting into. "I worked as a receptionist in an alternative greeting card company just so I could learn about the industry. The pay wasn't great, but the experience was invaluable."

"Every shut eye ain't sleep, every good bye ain't gone," is the quip on the cover of one with an image of an attentive little girl. The inside message: "No matter how old you get, don't forget what Mama taught you. Happy Birthday!"

Creating the cards is the easy part, she says. "My mother and Great Aunt Jo used that pearl of wisdom as I was growing up, and I just saw it on a greeting card."

After she has put words to the idea, illustrator Fred Harper helps capture her vision, which is often inspired by everyday experiences.

The business side has been much tougher going, however. As with any small business, the challenge of carving a niche and gaining market share is intense. That is magnified here because the goliaths — Hallmark and American Greetings — have freestanding branded stores that are ubiquitous, as well as exclusive supplier deals at other outlets. Also, they now serve myriad niche categories in addition to their more general cards.

● Get objective opinions of your product. "I would carry the card prototypes with me all the time and would show them to women in the nail salon or on the New York City subway while on my way to work. Their excitement about my product encouraged me to make it a reality or discard it."

But it is a big market, with about 7 billion cards sold annually. About half are seasonal and holiday cards. The rest are for everyday card-sending situations, with birthdays the most popular, the Greeting Card Association says.

Against that competitive backdrop, any niche player must be long on creativity and business acumen to succeed.

Raptakis, 46, shows off her creativity with every card, but continues to put in time to strengthen the business, taking courses in guerrilla marketing, licensing, branding, financial strategy and more.

"I don't have any successful entrepreneurial role models in my family," she says. She was raised in Brooklyn, N.Y.; her dad was a postal worker and her mom a clerical worker.

At one point, Raptakis was ready to give up on her fledgling business. "I was going through a patch of discouragement not knowing where this business was going," she says.

A major distraction was comparing the business with other businesses, where the successes seemed obvious. "I was going through some strategy sessions with other business owners, and everything with their businesses was great. They were making money, and here I was, still with my day job and not making money."

Since that time two years ago, she has regained her confidence by doing what comes naturally — creating cards.

One proved pivotal for her emotionally. It beat 1,100 other cards from 160 companies worldwide for the prestigious Louie award, the industry's equivalent of the Oscar. It won in the fast-growing Friendship/Encouragement category for cards sold in 2000 and priced above \$2.25.

The message for the award-winning card, featuring abolitionist Sojourner Truth on the cover, reflected her personal struggle for recognition in an unforgiving business: "Your Spirit Will Not Be Broken." The card celebrates the perseverance of those who struggled in hopes that future generations will have a smoother path.

"I send cards that I would like to get to encourage me, and 'Your Spirit Will Not Be Broken' is the card that I needed, so I had to create it," Raptakis says.

But the success has been bittersweet. Even with the industry's recognition, she faces ongoing entrepreneurial hurdles:

- **Financing.** The business remains self-funded. She says she'll have to show her husband, Dimitrios, an accountant, a sharper view of the numbers behind her vision before risking a small-business loan.
- **Staffing.** Part-time help is being considered to handle administrative tasks, including follow-up calls. "Sometimes customers are too busy to call me to place an order. So I could have someone call them and ask, 'How are the cards doing? Would you want to place an order right now?'"
- **Marketing.** Sales are concentrated along the East Coast, but she has the South in mind. "I would do very well, because they have more of a spiritual base, and some of the cards I have

would hit a nerve there," Raptakis says.

- **Venues.** More than 80 retailers carry the cards, but the mom-and-pop shops lack the foot traffic of larger retailers. "I need to change my marketing strategy. I'm in a lot of small stores that are struggling also."

The cachet of the Louie might help in the long run. It establishes winners as real greeting card publishers and bolsters their ability to get representation by independent card sales agents.

About Karen Mitchell-Raptakis

Born: Aug. 14, 1956, in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Family: Husband, Dimitrios Raptakis.

Business: Karen & Co. Greeting Cards.

Business formed: 1992 as sole proprietorship; incorporated in '99.

Headquarters: East Stroudsburg, Pa.

Web site:
www.sistathingcards.com
(Minimum order \$15)

Business created because: "I love greeting cards! Since I created handmade cards that my family and friends loved, I wanted to use my talents to create cards for the African-American community and the world."

Top advice for other entrepreneurs: "Make God a partner in your business."

Favorite card-giving occasion: "No occasion is necessary."

Other interests: "I write, read, listen to music, develop other aspects of the business and watch movies with my husband."

Business highlight: Opening the first box of finished cards as a participant at the National Stationery Show in May 1999.

It has for Pat Kane. Her year-old Seattle-based Postcards from the Moon won the Louie as Patriotic card and card of the year (for cards sold in 2001 and priced above \$2.25). "(The award) absolutely opened doors for us. We now have distribution in 34 states and eastern Canada," Kane says. "My husband, Gabe Palmer, contacted (sales) representatives recommended by stores that are our customers. Once the reps heard we were recipients of card of the year, they were willing to look at our stuff."

Kane's business now has nine people, enabling her to develop seven more lines.

Raptakis' business remains a one-woman shop without a steady sales rep, so she's had to learn to take rejection from buyers herself.

But her love for meaningful greeting cards has kept her going. And she's encouraged by statistics showing that of the 5.8 million small companies (fewer than 500 employees) in the USA, those owned by minority women are growing four times faster than all other companies, according to the Small Business Administration.

Raptakis remains committed to cards that cheer and give hope. And she dreams of the day when Karen & Co. Greeting Cards will be able to stretch with card lines that appeal to broader audiences as well as calendars, journals and other stationery products. Right now, her cards have a heavy bent toward "girlfriends."

"If you don't have that one girlfriend who you can tell things to or who you know can lift you up, you're in a bad state. I do think of my friends when I create cards: What will make somebody laugh? What will they want to hear in the way of encouragement? What kind of card can I send them just to say that I love them?"

Funding will play the biggest role in how soon she can expand, but she's armed with her homemade brand of optimism.

"The achievements of a people are based on the persistence and the perseverance of the individual," reads the cover of a card with an image of a runner wearing No. 1 and crossing a finish line. The encouraging inside message: "I say, 'You go girl!' "

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