Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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The hand-crafted lettering of Port Washington calligrapher Debi Zeinert is gracing lots of invitations and announcements these days, including those of the rich and famous

When calligrapher Debi Zeinert of Port Washington received a phone call from London from a woman with a heavy Arabic accent, she was initially suspicious.

But she soon learned the wife of the Kuwait ambassador to London wanted her to design and address her daughter Rasha's wedding invitations.

"She just called me out of the blue," Zeinert said. "That doesn't usually happen."

The ambassador, Khaled Al Duwaison, is among the high-profile clients of The Blooming Quill, Zeinert's calligraphy business.

Her calligraphy adorned actress Niecy Nash's wedding invitations, as well as those for Red Sox owner John Henry, a NASCAR executive and a quarterback for the New York Giants. She also penned reception cards for Martha Stewart's assistant. Most of her business comes from the East Coast.

Clients pay $5 per set to have inner and outer envelopes hand lettered. Zeinert provides camera-ready art for invitations for $300 to $500 and offers her own line of invitations.

For the past three years, Zeinert has been a preferred vendor at Martha Stewart's wedding show in New York. Her booth is in the Martha Stewart wing.

"I love the whole Martha Stewart thing," Zeinert said. "I actually flew back and forth to New York in a day to go to one of her parties."

Zeinert organizes two wedding shows in Milwaukee — a high-end show at the Pfister Hotel and a more casual event at the Harley-Davidson Museum.

Last week, Zeinert completed her one-year term as president of the International Association of Master Penman, Engrossers and Teachers of Handwriting with a week-long convention at the Hilton Hotel in Milwaukee.

“We had 220 people from six countries, and I entertained them for a week,” Zeinert said.

Among her best friends are two White House calligraphers.

It’s a world she never dreamed she would be part of when she decided to turn her hobby — she’s been doing calligraphy since she was 10 — into a home business in 1984, shortly after the birth of her second daughter.

Most of her business came from ads in bridal magazines and referrals until she started her website 15 years ago.

“I was one of the first calligraphers with a website,” Zeinert said. “I don’t think it was up a week when I had people from California contacting me.”

She was in the executive training program at Boston Store in Milwaukee and doing calligraphy late into the night and weekends to meet brides’ deadlines.

“I had to choose between work or calligraphy,” she said.

In 2001, Zeinert took a three-month leave of absence to see if she would like doing calligraphy full time. She loved it.

Then the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., occurred on Sept. 11, 2001.

“The whole world is falling apart, and I just quit my job,” Zeinert said.

But people continued to get married, and those who could afford it preferred their invitations be beautifully hand addressed.

Calligraphy, she noted, isn’t handwriting. It’s drawing.

“I draw each letter,” Zeinert said. “My handwriting is terrible. I have to print for people to read it.”

Among thousands of calligraphy samples, Zeinert said, she could pick hers out in a minute, as could any top calligrapher. She has several styles that customers can choose from.

She may add elaborate curlicues to a “g” or make the first letter more fanciful than normal, but the style is distinctive.

Once clients choose the style, they rarely question her design.

“They’re professionals and don’t have time for that,” Zeinert said. “But then there’s the occasional bride who has to see it 75 ways.”

She requests a sample of each invitation, which she adds to her repertoire. Sometimes, the

invite surprises her.

One couple's invitation was engraved on smoke-colored Plexiglas with a design on back that showed through. In addition to designing the lettering, she also addressed the cardboard folders in which the invitations were sent.

Most of her business comes from her website and high-end stationery stores across the country.

Zeinert was the first calligrapher for Bella Figura of Syracuse, N.Y., which she considers the best letterpress company in the United States. The company now has seven designers in addition to her.

The phone call from the ambassador's wife was so unusual, Zeinert said, because she usually works with wedding planners. She is getting more overseas business from her website. Last week, she shipped addressed envelopes to a bride in Australia.

Couples who use Zeinert's service often ask her to design birth announcements. One was for her granddaughter Natalia. Her daughter Heather and her husband didn't decide the baby's name until she was born.

"The minute they called, I penned her name," Zeinert said.

She designed the couple's wedding invitation and now is working with her daughter Heidi on save-the-date announcements and invitations for her wedding next summer.

Zeinert sometimes hires people to proofread her work and pack shipments, but the calligraphy is done only by her hand the old-fashioned way — with a pen carefully dipped in ink.

Image Information: A LIGHT BOX and line chart helped Debi Zeinert as she addressed envelopes in her distinctive, artful style. Photo by Sam Arendt