

INSPIRED Design

Sentiments and thoughtful design mark the newest in inspirational gifts.

by Mary Gerlach



Inspirational gifts today span categories as consumers look for more inspired design in stationery, décor, jewelry, books and even clothing. For the product designers themselves, inspiration is necessary to continually reinvent one of the most successful categories in the industry. *Giftware News* asked the people behind inspirational giftware to share their inspiration with us.

Inspired Support

In times of deep sadness, inspirational gifts can provide emotional assurance and comfort. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, yellow ribbons adorned many cars, and impromptu displays of love and loss filled New York City. Creating signs of collective sorrow honors those lost to tragedy and provides comfort to those who may seem powerless.

Such an emotion spurred the creation of inspirational giftware company AngelStar. During the Gulf War, the company's CEO, Nora Monaco, recalls that she and her friend owned a gift shop. Her friend created her own lapel pin backed by a yellow ribbon in support of the troops. "Our employee mistakenly sold this 'used' pin to [a] customer for almost five

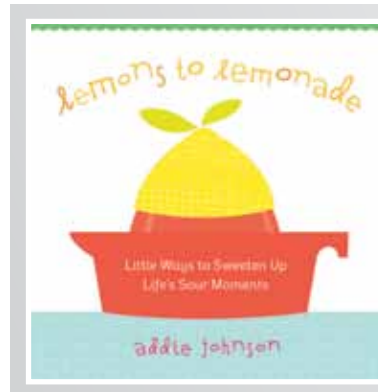
Bold Inspirations designed by artist Mary Anne Radmacher for Demdaco (888/336-3226 or www.demdaco.com), is a new product format for the company, Interactive Art. Each block has a coordinating sentiment and design on each side. Suggested retail: \$9-\$14.

times its actual worth, thinking it was one of our more expensive pins," Nora says. "When we realized what had happened we contacted the customer and told them of our mistake." The customer, Nora recounts, refused to return the pin. "She said her son was in Iraq, and finding this item in our shop at that moment had given her an immense sense of comfort and peace within."

This single event inspired Nora and her friend to create AngelStar, which now creates endless inspirational gifts and mementos. "We truly say that angels inspired us to create AngelStar," Nora says. Eventually, over time, Nora says that she and her partner closed their retail shop to create wholesale gift items full time. "We started with a tiny shop, and we now operate our business from our 50,000-square-foot facility."

Although angels and a lapel pin may have inspired the women to launch their business, Nora says that their customers provide continual inspiration as AngelStar grows. "They inspire us every day. Often, it's a story they share about how someone has used our gift or something special they want to share with us. AngelStar," Nora adds, "is not about creating more 'things' to sell, or being the biggest, it is about creating products that have meaning or inspire something within others."

Some of the most successful products the company creates, Nora explains, are the direct result of a desire to meet a need and "a heartfelt desire to be of service to others." AngelStar Worry Stones are an excellent example of this kind of product development at work. "A personal family member needed something to use as reminder to let go of stress and



SWEETEN YOUR SALES

"Lemons To Lemonade: Little Ways To Sweeten Up Life's Sour Moments" by Addie Johnson and published by Red Wheel (800/423-7087 or www.red-wheelweiser.com) is an uplifting book with lighthearted tips, quotations and images to inspire anyone. You'll find fine quotations from the book throughout this article. Suggested retail: \$15.95.

"MY WAY OF JOKING IS TELLING THE TRUTH; THAT IS THE FUNNIEST JOKE IN THE WORLD."

— George Bernard Shaw



The new Tea-For-One from Art Boutique by Pine Ridge Art (800/263-3551 or www.pineridgeart.com) includes a teapot, lid, cup and saucer that fit neatly together inside a decorative keepsake box. Each design has an uplifting message. Suggested retail: \$17.99.

worries during her cancer treatments during a very stressful time in her life. We wanted something that would be calming and simple, yet it also had to be durable," she says. Now, Nora says that AngelStar Worry Stones have touched millions of lives.

Inspired Photography

Following her sister's losing battle with cancer, Chrissy Ogden Marsh found a way to combine her love for stationery and her sister and create a line of inspirational, photography-driven greetings. She had spent years considering how she would create her own card line, but "it took a deep tragedy to inspire action," she says.

Bonair Daydreams was born with Chrissy's first card, a thank-you note she designed for those who attended her sister's funeral. "I had taken [a photo] of Tracy years before. This had been my mother's favorite picture of Tracy; it captured her essence, her love of life," Chrissy says. Beneath the

picture, Chrissy handwrote a Bible verse. "The response of friends and relatives touched by that card was so overwhelming," she adds, "that I felt led to start an official card line."

Now in the middle of her second decade in the card-making business, Chrissy strives to introduce anywhere from 15-28 new cards a year. "Throughout the year," she says, "I am photographing many different events or scenes in the hopes to use that image as a card in the future." In the spring, Chrissy begins the process of selecting images that she thinks will be the best for new stationery, and



Celebrating life's simple connections, Bonair Daydreams (888/2-BONAIR or www.bonairdaydreams.com) makes inspirational greetings with black-and-white photography. The card shown reads "And the song, from beginning to end, I found in the heart of a friend." Suggested retail: \$2.75.



Shine on Me, a new line of fused-glass home accessories from Pavilion Gift Company (888/762-4457 or www.paviliongift.com), includes tea-light holders, garden stakes, crosses, plaques, wall hangings, decorative plates and ornaments. Suggested retail: \$8-\$30.

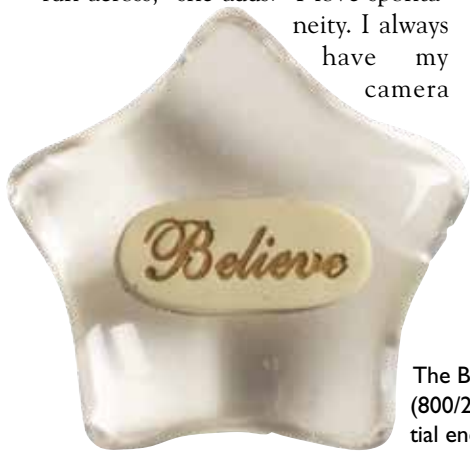
“WE CHOOSE OUR JOYS AND SORROWS
LONG BEFORE WE EXPERIENCE THEM.”

– Kahlil Gibran

then she finds quotations that best capture the emotion.

Then, with the help of her mom, Chrissy begins writing each card. “She and I have been writing my inside greeting text for 16 years via many long phone conversations,” Chrissy says. “The next step I have to do is handwrite all the quotes and inside greetings. I do not use a font; I handwrite all the inside and outside text.”

Chrissy continues to find her own inspiration in ordinary occurrences. With her camera at her side, Chrissy says she is searching for moments that surprise her and speak to her. “I always end up finding something, usually something I never expected to run across,” she adds. “I love spontaneity. I always have my camera



The Believe Dream Star Stones from **AngelStar** (800/264-3577 or www.angelstar.com) offer celestial encouragement. Suggested retail: \$4.50.

available for that wonderful, surprise heartwarming photo that literally may cross my path.”

Inspired Artists

A single artist planning to create and publish her first calendar in the early 1990s would go on to eventually form Pine Ridge Art, a gift company known for its bright, artful designs and inspirational sentiments. “In 1995 Pine Ridge Art was born and issued just two wall calendar titles and one frame design to the gift market,” Jacquie Severs, creative & marketing manager, explains.

This basic foundation of the company was set, and Pine Ridge Art continued to grow and focus on incorporating the work of talented artists. “Pine Ridge Art is proud to collaborate with many well-respected North American and international artists whose beautiful images have made our product line a success,” Jacquie says. Soon after the calendar line, she adds, Pine Ridge introduced complementary stationery products.

This robust product development begins with a blank slate. Working with suppliers, Pine Ridge Art’s product-development gurus search for a

blank finished product, and once they feel it’s in its most perfect state, they find the right art. “In some cases the artwork is sourced from our archive, and in some cases we approach artists for new work,” Jacquie says. Then, the designers adapt a painting into something that is appropriate for a gift item, “often doing extensive detail work on the inside pages or packaging,” she adds.

Some three years ago, Pine Ridge Art created a sister brand, Art Boutique by Pine Ridge Art, to further “utilize the company strengths in working with artists and apply this to a different gift market than our other art styles targeted,” Jacquie says. “Art Boutique by Pine Ridge Art is aimed to a more youthful and trend-oriented customer with a focus on gift-able products.” With its two brands, she says, Pine Ridge Art is able to offer a range of inspirational gifts with themes as different as wildlife, folk art and contemporary design and collage.

Jacquie adds that Pine Ridge Art is constantly on the watch for new, unique artists and themes to add to the company’s catalog. “For the Pine Ridge Art calendars and giftware,” she says, “we seek prolific artists with high-quality images on specific themes that suit market needs we have identified with our research.” Meanwhile, she says, the company looks for upbeat themes and messages for its Art Boutique brand. “We call these gift-able goods our ‘Upbeat



Carson Home Accents’ (800/888-1918 or www.carsonindustries.com) music box has a cross motif, inspirational message and plays “Amazing Grace.” Customize the music box by removing the sentiment card and replacing it with a personal photograph. Call for pricing.

Treats,’ because they put smiles on faces,” she adds. With this, Jacquie notes, Pine Ridge Art will continue to look for more artists who inspire and to expand its own offering of inspirational gifts.

Inspired Hobby

More than 40 years ago, Harry Carson Sr. nurtured his sand-casting aluminum hobby in his basement. This hobby, it turns out, was lucrative and would become the start of Carson Home Accents. As the company’s Sales Manager Robert Thibodeau tells it, when Carson “realized there was a market for these items, he then partnered with his two brothers and built an old shack on the family farm in which they started manufacturing cast-aluminum giftware.”

Several years later, Robert says, the brothers were no longer interested in the sand-casting business, but Carson continued his hobby-turned-business endeavor. “Harry built a new building and through the years, along with his children, built the business up to what it is today,” Robert adds.

Today, that very same business has evolved and become an importer. “In the year 2000 we made a decision to import giftware items that complemented what we were already doing, but at the same time would give us the ability to offer many other mediums,” Robert says. A team of talented designers based in Freeport, Pennsylvania, Robert says, do the majority of the product design and are “continually searching for that next idea and use the knowledge of our staff, sales force and customers in our planning and decision-making process.”

Inspired Teamwork

Gift companies, or any other company for that matter, often start with a single idea from a single person bold enough to start a company. Where the company goes as it begins to grow, however, depends on the team behind it. “From the inception of Pavilion Gift Company, our core focus has been on inspiration,” says Carol Zaccour, vice president of sales

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