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Pet portraits are a treat for Va. Beach pet photographer & clients

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Animal lover, Jill Beninato, 41, photographs golden retrievers Chance, in the water, and Cody, right, on the shores of Virginia Beach one bright September afternoon. Jeff and Paulina Thompson of Lynnhaven Colony, the owners of the two dogs, are some of Beninato's best clients.

(Kellie nowlin | the virginian-pilot)

By Hattie Brown Garrow
The Virginian-Pilot

Jill Beninato's materials for a client meeting don't entail a briefcase, file folders or even a desk.

A camera and squeaky toy or two will do just fine, thank you.

The clients are different, too.

This day's customers - Chance and Cody, a pair of fluffy golden retrievers - bounded across the sand for a beach gathering.

For the past six years, Beninato has made a living as a pet photographer. The animal lover and advocate enjoys capturing pet personalities - despite the occasional hazard.

"I've had dogs pee in my camera bag. I've had them kick sand on my lens," the Great Neck Meadows resident said. "I've seen it all."

On this particular September evening, however, Chance and Cody were on their best behavior. The two dogs dutifully posed for several side-by-side portraits before running into the water.

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"C'mon buddy. You're doing it," Beninato urged as she tried to shoot a photo of Cody swimming back to shore with a ball in his mouth.

A 1984 graduate of First Colonial High School, Beninato spent more than a decade designing jewelry. While living in Baltimore, she sold her work to some 130 galleries across the country.

In her free time, Beninato volunteered at the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. She socialized puppies, walked dogs and took photos of the animals that needed homes.

In 2000, about the same time her family was moving back to Virginia Beach, Beninato ditched the jewelry-making career.

"I got burned out. I was making every single piece of jewelry by hand in my basement," she said. "It wasn't my art anymore. It became my job."

Beninato took up photography professionally, having loved it since she was a teenager. Volunteering at the Virginia Beach SPCA made her realize that her business should center around animals.

"I said, 'This is what I'm supposed to do. I want to be a pet photographer,'" she said. "I love dogs. I love cats. I love the challenge of getting that shot."

Sit. Stay. Smile. Photography debuted in 2001. Since then, Beninato has taken hundreds of animal pictures, both whimsical and serious. She occasionally photographs people, too.

Customers will sometimes call her because their pets are on the verge of death and they want one last photo. Those jobs are especially hard, she said.

Lynnhaven Colony residents Jeff and Paulina Thompson hired Beninato to photograph Chance some time ago. Once they adopted Cody, they wanted the dogs photographed together.

Some of Beninato's previous pictures of Chance are among her favorites, said Paulina Thompson, 47. She especially loves one of him wagging his tail.

"It's one of those pictures that's so happy you can't help but smile when you look at it," she said.

Though most of her subjects are dogs, Beninato photographs any pet. Shoots take place at the beach, in parks, in people's backyards or anywhere else the pet owner might choose. The key, she said, is to catch the animal in its natural state, not in front of a backdrop.

"To me, the essence of a dog is running, playing, fetching, swimming," Beninato said.

Twice a year, the photographer volunteers for the Beach SPCA's pet portrait days and donates all her sitting fees to the organization. She also takes photographs during the SPCA's major events and works Fridays in the animal receiving area.

Beninato, 41, jokes that even her house has "gone to the dogs."

She rescued Clancy, a vizsla/greyhound mix, and Wiley, a German shepherd/labrador retriever mix, from the Maryland SPCA. Daisy, a dachshund, was given to her.

Her newest dog is a doberman mix adopted from the Beach SPCA. Cowboy was found on the streets of Gulfport, Miss., after Hurricane Katrina.

"People kind of know me as the crazy dog lady," she said.

Her husband, Chris Lapicki, and daughter, Caroline Lapicki, 9, occasionally help her at the SPCA or during a photo shoot.

When she's not working or volunteering, Beninato tries other types of art. In her work station - the room above her garage - she experiments with collage and oil painting. Through the Internet, she's connected with other artists who decorate journal pages and swap them amongst each other.

Beninato's latest pursuit is creating digital pet portraits on her computer. Using a digitizing tablet and stylus, she paints over an existing photo to make it more lively. Some of those works are on display at the SPCA through September.

And when it comes to photography, Beninato vows to set her own pace and never again let her art turn into a job.

"Every time I go out for a photo shoot, I never dread it," she said.

"It's all about patience with animals. If you let them run around, play, eventually you'll win, eventually you'll get the shot."

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