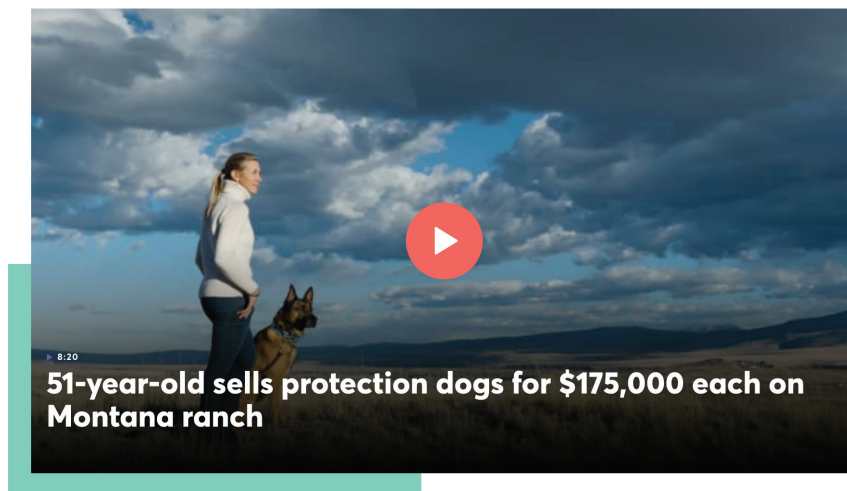


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51-YEAR-OLD QUIT POLICY CAREER TO START A BUSINESS—NOW THE WEALTHY BUY \$175,000 ‘PROTECTION DOGS’ FROM HER



Watch online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIXUGsN-XH4>

On a brisk October afternoon, Ruin — a 15-month-old Dutch Shepherd mix puppy with a dark brindle coat and one floppy ear — takes a break from an obstacle course and perches on a red wooden box inside a barn in Livingston, Montana.

His head sinks into the crook of a Svalinn trainer's arm, as the trainer deems Ruin one of his favorites. Two hours later, the trainer — now in a foam Michelin-man neck-to-heel suit — crouches near the box, imitating a quiet intruder. He cracks a whip onto a rubber mat. Ruin darts across the barn, leaping teeth-first into that same arm, holding his bite until another trainer yells, "Out."

Svalinn breeds, raises and sells \$175,000 dogs like Ruin who are trained to protect, live and

travel with wealthy families. Up to 46 mixed-breed canines at a time live on the company's 170-acre ranch — located in a town of 9,000 residents, 29 miles east of Bozeman — until they're roughly age 2. Svalinn brought in \$2.97 million in total income and was profitable in 2024, according to documents reviewed by CNBC Make It. (The business hasn't finalized its 2025 financials.)

After the drill, Ruin rolls onto his back, then licks a reporter's nose. "What we just saw was a perfect example of the 'on switch' and the 'off switch,'" Svalinn co-founder and president Kim Greene says. "To be able to deploy your dog and get them back into obedience, in just a nanosecond, is a really practiced art."

Greene, 51, launched the company, initially called Ridgeback Ltd., in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2005 with her then-husband. It focused on security advising, self-defense training and chaperoning high-profile diplomats through unsafe areas, Greene says.

The business was exciting, stressful and expensive to run, especially while raising twin boys, she says. "We were broke as a joke for a lot of years, so I didn't even have the luxury of thinking about personal finances. We were hanging on for dear life," says Greene.

Now, Svalinn has never been financially healthier, she says. And it's in the right place at the right time: When the company moved to the U.S. in 2013, Greene didn't know how popular Bozeman would become, especially for wealthy families willing to spend on personal security.

How to train a \$175,000 dog

Even if you can afford a Svalinn dog, Greene will try talking you out of the purchase, she says: "This is not a product that's for everybody. It just isn't."

The canines are meant to be family dogs who happen to be highly perceptive and "deployable" if a threat approaches. The company spends two years training each dog in protection, stability, obedience, socialization, agility and, occasionally, scenarios tailored to the pup's intended family. Svalinn even taught a dog how to ride a horse, trainers say.

Svalinn hires trainers from many different backgrounds — even prioritizing candidates without dog-training experience — so the dogs get used to hearing commands from a variety of voices, says Greene. "Our [clients] don't need to have superpowers or massive muscles or to bark orders," she says. "We are laypeople. The dogs are going to laypeople. The dogs have to feel very comfortable knowing that kind of individual."



A Svalinn dog perched on the ranch's indoor obstacle course. CNBC Make It

A trainer personally delivers each dog to its permanent home and spends about three days teaching the family how to work with the canine, Greene says. Often, the trainer returns 45 days later for a check-in, and many owners later bring their dog to the ranch for boarding and training alongside the younger pups, says Greene.

One customer, retired U.S. Air Force major and Delta Air Lines pilot Stephen Mazzola, says he was attracted to Svalinn over competitors because of the website's tagline, which emphasizes the dogs' approachability alongside their discipline: "Bred to love. Trained to protect."

Mazzola wanted a dog who could be a best friend and keep an eye on his family's 15-acre property in rural Montana, he says. Their Dutch Shepherd mix Jet has traveled, hiked and attended dinner parties with Mazzola and his wife since April 2024, he says.

"As far as being a member of the family, that is the thing I can't even put a price tag on," says Mazzola.

From bodyguards in Nairobi to dogs in Montana

Svalinn's earliest iteration didn't involve dogs at all.

Greene met her husband in Afghanistan, where she'd worked as policy advisor to former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, she says. They moved to Nairobi, one of three major African travel hubs, to start Ridgeback — his "passion project," she says.

When Greene became pregnant, she researched how to safely navigate Nairobi without a firearm or bodyguard. The couple adopted a Dutch Shepherd mix, Banshee, to "be both my best friend as well as my protector," she says.

People kept their distance from Banshee's brindle coat and intense stares, almost as if she was a forcefield, says Greene. Greene's husband decided to incorporate protection dogs to Ridgeback's other safety offerings, and the company sent employees to the U.S. to learn how to train the canines, Greene says. Eight years in, Ridgeback had yet to turn a profit, and the family left Nairobi, Greene says.



Greene (center) with Svalinn trainers and dogs on the Livingston ranch. CNBC Make It

Terrorism threats had increased in the area and Greene wanted a more hands-on education for her first-grade sons, she says. They moved to Wyoming, and then Montana, seeking an outdoor lifestyle for their children. They also wanted their business to operate near pockets of wealth, Greene adds.

Launching in the U.S. felt like starting over, Greene says. The couple flew 30 dogs overseas, filed for new licenses, changed the company's name and invested in branding and public relations. Svalinn focused entirely on protection dogs by 2015 and became profitable for the first time two years later, after the couple hired a budget-focused employee, says Greene.

But starting over was costly in other ways, Greene says: "We were dead set on making this happen, and it came at a very high price to our lifestyle ... My former husband and I were always into the absolute hardest mountain that we could climb." The couple divorced in 2019 and Greene's ex-husband left Svalinn in 2020, with an investor buying a majority of the company's equity. (Greene declined to name the investor.)

Greene initially wanted to sell her shares of the company, but "when I realized Svalinn was a blank slate, that it wasn't someone else's story anymore, that it was my story, I got really excited," she says. "I realized I actually really love what I do."

Protection dogs in the American West

When Svalinn moved to Montana, Greene invited prospective clients to the ranch and heard "crickets on the other end" of the phone, she says. "Now, five years later, the answer is, 'We've been looking to come there' or 'We come there once a year.'"

The American West sports a growing population of wealthy residents and tourists for multiple reasons: national parks, nostalgia for rural lifestyles and the absence of estate, inheritance and sales taxes, says Yale University sociology professor Justin Farrell, author of 2020 book "Billionaire Wilderness: The Ultra-Wealthy and the Remaking of the American West."

The ultra-wealthy are also investing in their personal and family's security, a trend amplified by incidents of public violence toward public figures, says James Hamilton, founder of Hamilton Security Group and a former FBI special agent. Many billionaires have comprehensive security programs, which could include protection dogs, surveillance cameras, safe rooms and a fleet of staff, Hamilton says.

Svalinn's clients aren't usually billionaires, Greene notes, but the business is still a logical beneficiary of the trend. Yet Greene doesn't want to train a dog for every interested buyer, she says, to protect the brand's exclusivity and quality control. "I would much rather stay boutique and very bespoke," she says.

Despite once referring to herself as a "reluctant leader," Greene says she finally feels comfortable with the business and her place within it. "This is my dream life, and it's wrapped up in my dream job," she says. "It's wrapped up in a business that encompasses my whole life with my children ... being in this beautiful place [and] doing the activities that I love with people I love being with."

After the October day of training, Greene takes her own dog, Highlander, onto a small hill overlooking the ranch. They see the barn, snuggled in a valley between snow-capped mountains, cloaked in amber grass and sagebrush.



Greene overlooks the Svalinn ranch with her dog, Highlander. CNBC Make It

After a moment of quiet, they walk back down the hill toward the barn. Together, they disappear inside.