

City TV dons stilettos and vinyl

The NYC channel sexes up — no more back-to-back council meetings here — and wins fans globally.

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NEW YORK — Looking like a superhero in her vinyl black trench coat, stiletto boots and red choker, she navigates the city with a hand-held Treo-like device and struts to the drum of rock music. Facing her camera crew, this diva host is more MTV than municipal programming, but make no mistake, she is the face of government television.

Kelly Choi, a journalist and former model, is the star of "Secrets of New York," the latest hit show in the rebirth of NYC TV — New York's government-run television station under Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's charge. Gone are the days of back-to-back City Council meetings and government news on Channel 25.

Now, the cable channel has positioned itself as a magnet for a younger, hipper audience, with programs featuring indie bands, bars, fashion, celebrity chefs and hip-hop videos.

It's a model that government-run stations across the country and around the world are trying to learn from. NYC TV's producers have received calls from stations in Los Angeles, Seoul and other cities interested in developing similar shows.

Producers say the concept is useful and entertaining for residents, and has boosted local tourism and business.

"We wanted stuff that people could actually use, as opposed to this ethereal wonkish government stuff," said NYC TV General Manager Arick Wierson, a former investment banker who helped revamp the station's image beginning in 2003 after working on Bloomberg's mayoral campaign.

Wierson, 34, had no television background but knew the city was missing an opportunity to communicate with its residents. The channel was a hodgepodge of news conferences and meetings that did not have a programmable schedule and often did not start on the hour.

The revamped station's flagship program, "Secrets of New York," explores little-known pockets of the city using flashy graphics, mysterious story lines and sex appeal. It has been broadcast nationally on 65 PBS stations — including KCET in

Los Angeles — and has aired on NBC.

The show won five Emmy Awards this year, and has become an anchor for the station's lineup. Viewers tune in weekly to watch Choi explore forgotten subway tunnels and sewers, and uncover stories about bridges, jails and city monuments. She has traveled 600 feet below ground into a water tunnel and has stood on top of the George Washington Bridge.

"It's more like a 'CSI' meets the History Channel kind of a thing, but for municipal television," said one of the show's producers, Buboo Kakati. "It's great because New York has so much history and so many stories."

Choi has become a New York icon, with bloggers obsessed with finding hidden messages in her jewelry. (Playing to her fans, producers once scanned a code from "The Matrix" onto one of her chokers.)

But the real star of every show is New York — its neighborhoods, landmarks, culture and history. Whether people live in Brooklyn or in Bowling Green, Ky., there is a familiarity and fascination with New York, producers say, because of its leading role in art, fashion, music, literature and theater.

Some of the channel's other

popular programs include "New York Noise," which spotlights the underground music scene; "\$9.99," a guide to free and cheap things to do; "Cool in Your Code," which suggests place to go in the city's various ZIP Codes; and "The Bridge," which traces the roots of hip-hop.

Meanwhile, the city continues to operate other channels that broadcast City Council meetings and programs for ethnic communities.

On a Brooklyn waterfront on a recent sunny day, Wierson looked at a rusted grain factory that was long ago abandoned and has become a popular place for secret rave parties. Producers chose this area to shoot an upcoming episode on industry because it used to be a popular area for shipping and receiving.

"Everybody and their mother knows Soho, Fifth Avenue, Central Park," said Wierson, "but who has seen this?"

"Quiet on the set!" someone yelled. "Action."

Decked out, with shiny red earrings and a red ring, Choi began: "Remnants of New York's industrial past dot the landscape across the five boroughs. Most of these early industries developed along the waterfront where there was easy access to shipping."

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SHOWS ~ Secrets of New York

HOME

PRIME TIME

- Rocktop NYC
- Behind the Label
- Blueprint NYC
- City Classics
- Cool in Your Code
- Dope Doc
- Eat Out NY
- Fashion in Focus
- Fashion Week in Focus
- Full Frontal Fashion
- Indie in the Archives
- It's My Park
- Media 3.0
- New York Noise
- New York 901
- Parade Town USA
- Press Play
- Reservations Required
- Secrets of New York
- Summer Stage
- The Bridge
- The History Channel Presents

Secrets of New York

As hard as the rock this city is built on, its mysteries are even harder to break. What lies behind New York City's tough-as-nails veneer? It's the hidden, undocumented and unknown enigmas we call Secrets of New York.

Watch promo 1 in 30s

Watch promo 2 in 30s

Premieres

NYC TV Channel 25
Tuesdays at 8:00 PM

Encores

NYC TV Channel 25
Wednesdays at 10:30 PM
Saturdays at 9:00 PM

SPECIAL EPISODE

Special TriBeCa Episode
Debuts April 28th
WNBC Channel 4

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'SECRETS' REVEALED: NYC TV's website shows former model Kelly Choi, host of the hit show "Secrets of New York."

The show has taken Choi and the crew into parts of the city closed off to the public — a perk of working for the government.

They have filmed at the top of the Chrysler building; at an abandoned champagne vault beneath the Brooklyn Bridge; and in an underground location where President Franklin D. Roosevelt used to get off the train and board an elevator, which would take him to the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in secret so he would not be seen in his wheelchair.

Choi said she had been recognized in other cities and by tourists from Guam and other places overseas. She said New York's fame was partly what had made the station's turnaround such a success.

It is a model that Wierson sees becoming especially popular in places like Miami, Los Angeles and Washington.

"This is a paradigm shift," he said, "this is a new way for cities to market themselves."