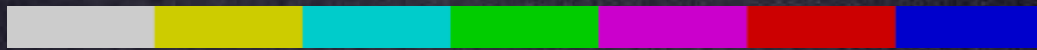


SISTER ACT

CHIAROS CREATE THE VISION FOR TELEVISION

BY RACHEL MORTON

PHOTOS BY BOB HANDELMAN



Nine years separate sisters **Victoria** and **Amy Chiaro**, but not much else. These women are close friends, neighbors, and even colleagues of a sort. Their homes are within one block of each other in Manhattan's East Village. They share a car. They co-parent a black toy poodle named Napoleon. And both are having a ball with their careers in television—Amy '92 as the co-executive producer of *The Dr. Oz Show*, a syndicated show on NBC, and Victoria '00 while working behind the scenes on award-winning children's television shows. > >





[sister act] >> Their early rural existence at the family country store, bakery, and apple farm in Troy seems a long way from New York City's television industry. But what the sisters remember is being at the heart of the gathering place for locals, the center of information that was buzzing with news and happenings.

Amy's career path into television news was focused and swift. After many years at NBC News, she is now co-executive producer of *The Dr. Oz Show*, a new talk show on NBC.

Victoria grew up in Amy's long and impressive shadow. And though she followed her older sister to Emma and has ended up in the television business herself, she has taken a very different turn, and a very conscious one.

It's a mutual admiration society between these two sisters. Amy thinks Victoria's work is fascinating. "To be in the purely creative world she's in, it's wonderful. I miss some of the creativity and free thinking she gets to do."

Then Victoria reminds her sister about the stunts she has pulled on various TV shows: "You come up with amazingly creative ideas. 'Let's throw our hot anchor in a fat suit.' Or 'Let's put him in an elevator and talk about proper etiquette.'"

Both admit their lives are consumed with their work and that they love it. And that they have little time left for anything else beyond each other. And Napoleon, of course.

IT WAS DECEMBER OF 2008 and Amy Chiaro '92 was on top of her game, doing what she loved best—news. She was the senior broadcast producer of the *Today* show and the executive producer at *Weekend Today*, where she was in charge of all aspects of the nation's premier morning show. From 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., what NBC aired was what Amy decided her viewers should see. It was a dream job for anyone in television.

So it took an extraordinary offer to get Amy to even contemplate leaving the *Today* show. She'd been approached by Harpo Productions, Oprah Winfrey's production company, about producing a new show they had in development—one featuring Dr. Mehmet Oz as the host.

Amy had always been impressed by Oz—"If there is anyone out there who is the best guest on TV, it's got to be him"—and she felt he had a genuine passion to help people. Yet she hesitated.

But then she got a call from Dr. Oz himself right after Thanksgiving. He asked her to meet him outside her office at that iconic television locale—30 Rock—Rockefeller Center, the home of NBC. They stood by the big Christmas tree, and he told her about his vision for this show.

THE WIZARD BEHIND OZ

AMY CHIARO '92
BRINGS THE DOCTOR
INTO THE HOUSE

He wanted a show that would be something of a hybrid between news and talk. The audience would have some overlap with the early morning news audience with whom she was so familiar, but the show would have a totally different mission. With so many people without access to good health care, Oz wanted to offer useful medical information and advice. He wanted to become the doctor for those who had no doctor. And he wanted Amy to help him do this.

Amy was sold. “Only someone like him could get me to leave *Today*,” she says.

“He could do one or two surgeries a day, or he could attempt to help millions of people a day. That was so important to him, and it’s important to me.”

Amy agreed to become co-executive producer, and soon thereafter she stepped down at *Today* and stepped up into *Oz*.

Amy Chiaro’s journey from *Today* to *Oz* could be counted in actual steps—both shows are filmed at 30 Rockefeller Center, and their offices are within a stone’s throw of each other. Her entire television career has been a step-by-step, logical progression. She always knew this is what she wanted to do from childhood, where “the breakfast table was strewn with newspapers,” and her mother, Carla Rasmussen Chiaro ’72, and her father where always “talking about what was going on.”

While she was at Emma, she was editor of *The Clock*, interned at the local CBS affiliate, and worked at WAMC public radio in Albany. While at Cornell, she worked at

the student radio station and during summers interned in television—one summer on *Nightline*, another summer at the *Today* show. And she also worked as an anchor, a reporter,

and a news editor while in college. She became an associate producer for NBC News Northeast Bureau, and from there she took a job at *Weekend Today* as associate producer, and practically every year moved up the ladder until in 2007 she was named senior broadcast producer. From that perch, her job was to oversee all aspects of the 7–9 a.m. slot of the top-rated national morning show.

When she moved to *The Dr. Oz Show*, Amy got to help develop the show, shape it through many months of research and planning. They knew it was going to be a health and wellness show, but what would be the right show configuration—in terms of both content and presentation—for this daytime audience?

The set, which had previously housed *Late Night with Conan*, was radically redesigned to create an intimate space where the audience would actually be physically close to Dr. Oz and would feel comfortable speaking up and asking questions.

“We didn’t want him at a podium,” said Amy. To accomplish this, they designed a central floor area that actually rotates, so the audience seated there slowly spins around, following Dr. Oz as he goes from one side of the horseshoe-shaped stage to the other. “I call it the Orca show,” Amy laughs. “You could get splashed.”

Oz does travel around that stage set, and Amy is always with him. They are able to communicate with each other throughout the show via a little earpiece Oz wears. She might be whispering, “You’re headed to the Truth Tube now,” where guests step up to a large tube on which statistics are projected about their weight, blood pressure, body fat, waist size, dress size, etc. When, during one segment of the show, he tells a woman and her teenage daughter who are dieting and eating too few calories that this is actually going to doom their diets to failure, Amy urges him to emphasize the points he is making: “That’s really great,” she whispers in Oz’s ear during the break. “Let’s really hit home with this idea that they’ve been on a starvation diet.”

All the shows are broken into several segments that address different topics. It’s not like *Oprah*, or *Dr. Phil*, for instance, which are primarily single-topic shows. In this first season of *Dr. Oz*, two shows are taped each day, three days a week. It’s a lot of work for everyone, especially the doctor, who must be prepared for each of these diverse topics.

The day begins early. Amy and the producers meet Oz in his dressing room at 7 a.m. She advises him about the morning show. He has already been briefed the night before, but she takes him through it again in more detail. There will be a quick rehearsal in the studio later in the morning when he’ll go over his lines (which are just a few phrases on the teleprompter to key him into the concepts he wants to discuss). Also during the practice run, props are checked.

Amy says that an important role she plays in this show is to provide the voice of Everywoman, as it were, the woman at home. To raise the issues, the questions we all ask ourselves. “The things I talk to my mom about, to my friends about,” she says.

For there is a kind of fervent belief in the mission of this show—bringing health care to the people, empowering people to ask questions and take control of their health. “This is a service,” Amy says. “People

THERE IS A FERVENT BELIEF IN THE SHOW’S MISSION—BRINGING HEALTH CARE TO THE PEOPLE.



IN THE AUDIENCE

Being in the television studio audience of *The Dr. Oz Show* does seem a little like being in the Land of Oz. And I'm not talking Dr. Mehmet Oz, I'm talking the Wizard.

The floor swivels magically. Cameras on booms swoop up to your face like some kind of quizzical long-necked robotic water birds. We in the audience were excited when we arrived, but after 15 minutes of deft handling by the resident comedian, we are all nearly jumping out of our seats with anticipation, waiting for the show to begin and for Oz to arrive. We have gotten instruction on how and when to applaud. Instruction on when to stand up and how quickly to take our seats again. This is OK by us because this is TV! We're going to be on TV! On TV—us!

When Dr. Oz strides onto the set, the house goes wild. Yes, we've been told to go

the kind of medical credentials that would make him a star at any AMA convention. But here he is, dazzling an audience of lay-people, who can't help but scream a little and reach out to touch him as he walks past them on his way to open the show. This is the cult of the host. And though Oz is an unlikely object of celebrity worship—he seems modest, thoughtful, and quiet—he has developed a passionate audience who are devoted to him.

After the applause dies down and we all take our seats again, Oz turns and addresses the camera, which has followed him in. Oz speaks warmly, personally, with enthusiasm to the empty eye of the camera telling the people out there at home what the show will be about that day. We in the studio audience sit silently watching the brilliant bubble of television-land that is

wild, but this audience is truly thrilled to see Dr. Oz, to be near him. An incredibly accomplished surgeon and prolific author, Oz has

enveloping Oz and the camera, and we are feeling a little ignored if truth be told. But then the camera wheels away—commercial break!—and Oz turns his smiling warmth upon us and, we come alive.

No one seems more grateful to be alive than the audience member who is chosen to act as Dr. Oz's assistant during one of the most popular segments of the show. This is a highly coveted position, and the lucky young woman runs up to the stage laughing and exclaiming, clearly beside herself with joy. Her friend, who was seated next to her, is actually weeping with happiness.

It's true that there is a kind of glamorous allure to having your face projected into the millions of homes where this show is being watched, and that helps build the excitement and happiness of members of the studio audience.

But there is also something about Oz. He projects a kindness, empathy and understanding, a genuineness, that makes people feel seen and understood. And that's powerful medicine.

can ask him things they're afraid to ask their own doctors. And for some, he is the only doctor they have."

Amy, the executive producer, Dr. Oz, and their staff dream up the topics that Oz covers on each show. Recent topics have included how to prevent ovarian cancer (Oz gives six warning signs); how to avoid urinary tract infections (one is, amazingly, eat horseradish and avoid chili peppers); testing the safety of your drinking water (Oz provides ways to test and treat tap water). He names three fashion trends that are bad for you—tight jeans, pointy shoes, and dangly earrings. He answers questions about sex and fatigue and lactose intolerance, fertility and weight loss and Lyme disease.

Earlier in the morning during the run-through for the show, the art director, Diann, wheels in a table covered with two large pale mounds. Because *The Dr. Oz Show* prides itself on dealing with medical questions people might be reluctant to talk to their own doctor about, the mantra is, "There are no stupid questions." Today, that question is: Should one squeeze a pimple?

Everyone on the set watches in fascinated horror as Dr. Oz confronts these mounds. They are pimples—two of them—each about the size of a Thanksgiving turkey. First, he will squeeze one showing how squeezing can damage the skin and tissue. Then he'll lance the other one. He pushes and pushes and suddenly a geyser of white creamy material erupts out of the center.

Eewwwww! There's a chorus of groans and laughter. Even the director, unseen in the control room, can be heard exclaiming over the intercom, "Nasty!"

"Diann, that's brilliant!" declares Oz, as he learns the white filling is actually coconut cream. She raises her arms in mock victory and gets a little applause. She has made four of these monstrous blemishes. Two for this rehearsal, and two for the real show that will start in a few minutes.

Oz goes from segment to segment, listening to the segment producers, getting instructions about timing, position, props and visual aids, quietly and quickly taking it all in.

"He's new to hosting, but he's a sponge," Amy says simply about his ability to absorb massive amounts of material.

The show has, in addition to the conventional writers, producers, director, and technical staff, a medical unit consisting of six people, three of them medical students from Columbia University. They do research and assist Oz so he accurately presents the most current medical information available.

It's when the medical issues cross over into the news that Amy is fully in her element. "I'm a news person. I'm constantly checking for the red light, the pager, the vibrator on the Blackberry. While I may be on a talk show, I can't help but be involved with the news; it's how I'm wired." Recently when a task force from the U.S. Department of Health contradicted earlier recommendations and advised that mammograms should start later and perhaps not occur so frequently, the women of America were thrown into confusion. Who better than Dr. Oz to address the issue in a timely manner?

"To me, nothing is better than breaking news," Amy says. "I think that's when I really come alive." They decided to devote 15 minutes of the show to the issue and to bring in oncologists and to provide the definitive word on this issue that everyone was concerned about.

Oz's recommendation fell between the old guidelines and the new guidelines. If women have risk factors like a family history, he believes they should start at 40, but if women have no risk factors, 50 is an appropriate time to start getting mammograms.

"It's a fascinating thing to have conference calls with oncologist Dr. Susan Love, the preeminent breast cancer researcher, who happened to be in Amsterdam. Tracking down all the right characters. Deciding what was the right information and how we could be responsible and get at the upset women felt. Those are moments that I love."

After the show on this day concludes, Amy is satisfied. "Things were tight today," she says. Keeping a multi-segmented, hour-long show running smoothly, on time, with multiple guests and a live audience is no small feat. Amy is like the director of a complicated little opera. "I love an efficient ship," she says. "We are constantly tweaking the process, watching the clock."

She's proud that in the two months they've been on air, they are already the #3 talk show. "So that's really huge. Everyone is really happy with it. This is the kind of show a station likes. Because of its newsy content, it ties nicely into their newscasts."

It's true Harpo Productions and Sony Television have invested a lot in this show. But so has Amy. A launch takes a massive time commitment, and Amy admits her free time is pretty much shot and her personal life has suffered, as is common with any career in television. Amy, who is 36 years old and single, often doesn't even have time for her dog, a poodle named Napoleon. So she's worked out a co-dog-owning relationship with her sister, Victoria '00, who lives nearby.

"You can only have one baby at a time, and this year, it's the show." ■



MORE THAN PUNS & PUPPETS

VICTORIA CHIARO '00
HAS FOUND HER NICHE
IN CHILDREN'S TV

My dog has fleas. Did you know these four words can be sung in the four notes necessary to correctly tune a ukulele A, D, F#, B. And sung they are, many times, as ukuleles are tuned and strummed during the children's show *Lomax: The Hound of Music*.

In the episode "Flea Bath" we learn that Lomax does indeed have fleas. Two of them to be exact—named Louise and Clark—and these particular fleas are prone to doing the hula and sliding down his hair follicles as if on a barber pole.

Lomax is a puppet, as are Louise and Clark, as is Delta the cat. They are part of the regular cast of this popular new television series produced for PBS. Just finishing its first season on television, *Lomax: The Hound of Music*, has garnered much praise for its inventive writing and puppetry, and for its mission of encouraging children's musicality.

The premise of the show is that a young musicologist named Amy travels around the country in the caboose of an old-fashioned steam engine with her dog, a "melody hound" named Lomax, and her cat, Delta. Lomax uses his doggy tracking ability and sniffs out tunes. So for instance, they go to Buffalo and find and sing "Buffalo Gals."

On this particular episode, Lomax gets a sudsy bath while everyone sings the old song "There Ain't No Bugs on Me" accompanied by an itinerant ukulele player named Avocado Jane. (Louise and Clark have taken refuge during the bath in waterproof HazMat suits.)

This all happens on the train, on the way home from a journey to San Francisco, the place where, Amy tells us, the ukulele was played for the first time on the mainland. Along the way, they've met a ukulele-playing goat, who taught them an old African-American song, "Bill Grogan's Goat," and then later Avocado Jane teaches them to sing the Hawaiian classic, "Aloha Oe," and they and the kids at home learned how to dance the hula.

A lot goes on during one episode of *Lomax: The Hound of Music*. A lot of music, a lot of fun, some bad punning, and unbeknownst to the kids at home who are busy singing along, or clapping or dancing around, there's a lot of learning, too.

The creative minds behind this show are Christopher Cerf, formerly editor at Random House and a renowned songwriter for *Sesame Street*, and Norman Stiles, longtime head writer for *Sesame Street*. Their multimedia production company, Sirius Thinking, Ltd.,

produces children's television shows, and they are the co-creators of *Between the Lions*, a show in its ninth season on PBS with 10 Emmy Awards, and now, *Lomax*, in its first season.

The go-to person behind the scene is Victoria Chiaro '00. As production assistant at Sirius Thinking, Ltd., for the last two years, she has handled all the day-to-day tasks involved with keeping the business and production end of the operation up and running.

Victoria feels particularly in synch with the goals and vision of Sirius and these shows. At Emma, she says, she found direction from Jack Easterling, "whose passion for art history and architecture really inspired me." That fueled her creative instincts, and she went on to major in English and art history at SUNY Albany. During college, she interned at *Cosmopolitan* magazine and at NBC's *Today* show, *Weekend Edition*. She worked at *Self* magazine for two years and completed the Columbia Publishing program. But in spite of her eclectic job and internship history, nothing prepared her for the wildly diverse tasks she'd be taking on at Sirius.

She copyedits and helps prepare scripts for each show. She's learned about budgeting and scheduling. She deals with royalty issues. She designs DVD and CD covers. She does the producing for shows and live events.

"I get the puppeteers there, get the puppets there, and get my boss there. Make sure everyone has the scripts. Make sure the scripts are written. Any detail work, I do it."

And she does it in a beautiful 100-year-old brownstone on the Upper East Side. The first floor, the hallways, and even the bathroom are filled with paintings, drawings, cartoons, and other mementos of Cerf's long career in the arts in New York. Above the mantel in the dining/conference room is a sculpture hand-carved by Dr. Seuss (Theodore Seuss Geisel), which goes well with the Miss Piggy sculpture posed like Degas's *Little Dancer*. A spiral staircase leads to the second floor and Victoria's office, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and a marble fireplace, as well as an impressive selection of rubber ducks, snakes, and toads. Above that is a floor for the Cerf private residence. It is as beautiful and interesting a workplace as one could imagine—filled with history and personality.

Though her bosses are veterans in show business, Victoria is still young enough to remember her days as a *Sesame Street* fan. She loved it then, and she loves it now. And she can't quite believe her luck that Cerf, the man who wrote some of her favorite *Sesame Street* songs, like "Born to Add" and "Put Down the Duckie," is now



A sculpture handcarved by Dr. Seuss hangs above the mantel in the conference room at Sirius Thinking, Ltd.

I GET TO WATCH SESAME STREET VIDEOS! IT'S RESEARCH!

her boss. Plus, required research often includes watching YouTube clips of early *Sesame Street* skits.

"It's research! I get to watch *Sesame Street* videos!" she exclaims.

Between the Lions, a daily show in its ninth season on PBS, helps preschoolers acquire beginning reading skills and a love of reading. Each episode, using the premise of four lion puppets that run a library, presents a variety of animation, puppetry, live action, music video, and graphic segments.

With *Lomax*, the production team hopes to encourage children's musical skills and to introduce them to a range of music they might not otherwise have access to. "We're basically teaching children to be more musical," says Victoria. "That's actually something we talked about in Ms. Harrison's neurology course at Emma. The younger you introduce kids to music, the better sense of melody and rhythm they'll have when they're older." They use the Feierabend curriculum, a system created by a respected music educator who worked with the Hartt School.

"We stuck with American folk music," says Victoria, "like 'There Ain't No Bugs On Me' or 'I Had a Rooster.' It's great because we're introducing these songs to kids—old traditional American songs that some kids aren't hearing as much as you would think."

The particular spin put on these songs can take some crazy turns, as when they created a duet sung in all meows between Delta the puppet cat and Amy dressed as her own grandmother wearing a bear costume, on the mountain. (Don't ask—it sounds complicated, but it all makes sense if you watch it.)

"It's beautiful," exclaims Victoria, chuckling at the memory. "It is orchestrated. And it's all meows. You can set a scene that is so silly and so preposterous and make it so educational. That's the brilliance of my bosses."

Also brilliant is the way they use the puppets and how children imbue the puppet with a life of its own. Victoria has seen this firsthand in the many live shows they put on in schools. She helps organize these events, where they sing songs and read books to children.

"These are so much fun," she says. "The kids just scream with excitement at the puppets.

These are the same puppets they see on TV, and they were screaming like they were Elvis. You really see the impact it is having on the kids. That's the best."

She remembers a particular show they did on the Essex Steam Train and Riverboat in Connecticut. They used a type of puppeteering where the human puppeteer (known as a puppet wrangler) is visible. This was the protocol used in the Broadway show *Avenue Q*.

"This goes against the Jim Henson philosophy," says Victoria. "He was a real stickler about not ever seeing the puppeteers. But it really works. Peter Linz, who plays Lomax—the way he moves the dog, the kids don't even notice him."

Christopher Cerf told her a story about the puppeteer who plays Big Bird. "He said that between takes they'd pull the costume off of him, but he'd keep his Big Bird legs on. The kids would come over to him and start talking to his legs as if he was still Big Bird. Kids totally see past the puppeteer whose mouth is moving. It's so cool."

In spite of all the fun, Victoria has stretched in a different way from this job. "It has definitely taught me how to juggle a lot at the same time. And it has brought out the left-brain side of my habits that I didn't know even existed—staying very organized, budgeting, and scheduling."

But she does love the off-the-wall, creative side to the job and her bosses.

"They get these crazy ideas," she laughs. "I like that funny, ironic tone. The bad puns. I love that about how they write the show. Just the quirky ideas these writers come up with. Every day, working with a group of people who are so creative has been so amazing." e

