



A very fine address

Shari Kulha, National Post · Friday, Sept. 3, 2010

New York real estate broker Michele Kleier and her daughters, Sabrina and Samantha, have just emerged from a stretch limo, along with a television producer and two journalists, in front of the new Shake Shack burger bar on East 86th Street. It's a muggy Manhattan afternoon, but the Kleiers look fresh and fabulous, each in her patent red high heels, sparkly necklace and spotless makeup.

Still energized from having shown off two of their firm's magnificent listings, they alight onto the sidewalk as a woman calls out from a nearby bus queue. "*Selling New York!*" she shouts, just one step away from the bus's front doors and her chance at a decent seat. The others in the line barely glance over, but the opportunity to speak to a local celebrity is too much for the fan, who, at the risk of missing her bus and increasing her time in the unforgiving heat, raises her arms in pre-hug mode and tippy-toes toward Michele Kleier.

"*Selling New York?*" the woman asks, a tad doubtful such a meeting in this unlikely place could possibly be happening, but the star-in-the-making walks toward her fan as if meeting a long-ago friend. "Yes, it is!" she replies, as the two hug and smile in an impromptu pas-de-deux.

"I love your show," the woman gushes. "It's so classy and" I lose the trail of her comments as I focus on the younger Kleiers taking in their mother's pleasure at being recognized. The girls' smiles are wide and wonderful, clearly proud of her, and, by reflection, of their own good fortune.

It isn't the first time Mom had been spotted; just the evening before, Ms. Kleier, president of Gumley Haft Kleier brokerage and matriarch of the family firm, says she was approached at a restaurant by a television agent. Stardom is still a surprise to the Kleiers; HGTV's *Selling New York* was an instant hit when it aired this spring in the United States (it premieres this Wednesday at 9 p.m. in Canada).

The Kleiers (Sabrina and Samantha are executive vice-presidents of the firm, dad Ian is chairman, and Sabrina's husband is also on the payroll) sell only the sorts of homes that line the best streets of the Upper East Side, such as the just-viewed \$28.5-million, 8,360-square-foot, nine-bedroom classic Park Avenue penthouse with views over the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the two-storey, \$8.95-million top-floor new-build loft on East 85th with full-height window walls overlooking the city.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the economic downturn in the U.S., it seems viewers are still “keen on seeing inside the buildings they see through the bus windows every day,” says Shaun Osher, chief executive of Core, the other brokerage the show follows. Each episode goes behind the scenes in the selling process — it’s a reality show in the original sense, no tension or hysterics to be seen; it’s the properties that are the real celebrities.

The charming (and supremely photogenic) team at Core focuses on downtown neighbourhoods — areas such as Chelsea, Soho and the latest hot ’hood, the Bowery. Mr. Osher believes the city’s neighbourhood divisions are less distinct these days, that with doorman buildings popping up downtown, whether new builds or conversions, many can go head to head with those uptown. These buyers, however, want unique streetscapes, loft-like spaces, proximity to the best restaurants and nightlife and easy access to the financial district as well as midtown. “There is no generic condo in New York. Each has its own story,” Mr. Osher says. “Today’s buyers are looking for open spaces, high windows, tall ceilings that are conducive to the way we live now,” and that are found in abundance in the old warehouses. “And,” says the doting father of two young girls, “it’s a great place to raise a family.”

Mr. Osher’s colleague, the via-Oakville, Ont., Maggie Kent — a doppelgänger of *CSI*’s Marg Helgenberger — shows visitors a penthouse in a converted Beaux Arts building at 141 Fifth Ave., where Mr. Osher’s dictum about uniqueness is proven. This \$12-million, 3,200-sq.-ft. unit has a two-storey master suite in the shell of the building’s cupola (one of only five residential cupolas in the city), where its first level is for sleeping and the second is the ensuite. Here, a soak in the tub would surely be like luxuriating in a glorious, oversized Fabergé egg. And indeed the riches are all around, from the fine finishes to the three separate terraces with views of the downtown roofscape.

During a break in the tour, Ms. Kent discusses the advent of TV into the profession of selling homes. “At first we were concerned about the quality of other reality shows, and how Core would be reflected,” she says. “But once we saw what the production company had done and how that team worked, we felt comfortable.”

Does she, too, have fans on the streets of Manhattan? Apparently she has, given the flavour of some of the phone calls she’s received. “You try to take the calls with grace, and hope that someday one of them will be a buyer,” she says with ultimate diplomacy.

The show’s Canadian production company — which produced Brad Lamb’s *Big City Broker* — also set the Kleiers at ease, in two ways. They also liked *Big City Broker*, but more important, they liked that JV Productions is a family firm, because, to the Kleiers, family is everything.

The Kleier brood — always talking at the same time and never without cellphones in hand — spend endless amounts of worktime and downtime together, dine together four or five nights a week after a full day in the same office, and also spend summer Sundays at the beach, building sandcastles (or condo

towers?) with the youngsters of the next generation. “We are always together,” Sabrina says. “We even have a three-way conference call at the end of each day just before bedtime.”