

## UNSCRIPTED

# Chera TV, “Legal Queens” producers talk vertical ambitions in unscripted

By Nicholas Sokic

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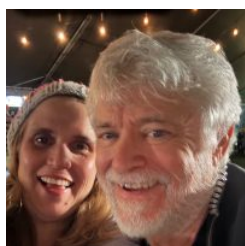
The new L.A.-based vertical streaming platform Chera TV hopes to make a statement via the burgeoning medium, starting with unscripted series *Legal Queens*, which launches on April 27 alongside the streamer.

**Chera TV** was founded by Kylie Karson, EVP of production and development; Calvin Singh, chief operating officer; and Candace Mizga, VP of production and development.

Singh has about a decade of experience in unscripted production including roles at Citizen Jones and Love Productions. As he tells *Realscreen*, he was pitched on the vision behind Chera TV by its principals, and was swayed in part by the team's research that showed significant overlap between audiences for vertical dramas and unscripted and reality programming.

“[The idea was] let's try to create something that will elevate the space. Make elevated content ... but also get rid of all of these tropes that are in your traditional verticals as well,” says Singh. “There's **misogyny**, there's female abuse. Unfortunately, it's what keeps selling so the foreign vertical platforms keep making them. But there's a whole world out there.”

The Chera team incorporated last summer and began work on a production slate, which features *Legal Queens* (pictured top). The reality format is set inside West Coast Trial Lawyers, an L.A. firm handling headline-making celebrity cases. It follows an all-female team of attorneys navigating courtroom drama, celebrity clients and intense rivalries under the leadership of CNN legal analyst Neema Rahmani.



L.A.-based Neighborhood Pictures, with showrunner, co-creator and executive producer Eric Gardner, alongside fellow EPs, co-creator Maria Alexandria Beech (pictured left) and Rod Molina, came to Chera with the pitch for the series, which runs 150 minutes over 80 episodes – each between one and three minutes. According to Gardner, who has worked on everything from *Survivor* to Bravo franchises like *Shahs of Sunset* and *Below Deck*, the pitch process was like any other, complete with a sizzle reel and deck.

On Neighborhood's part, Beech explains the series was a much slower burn, with the prodco first developing the project in 2018, with a reel created the following year. Skepticism from agencies and the pandemic pushed the project to the background, until the team was inspired to make another reel shortly before pitching Singh.

While Singh revealed the streamer is also in the works on a dating series – and that Chera is actively taking pitches from producers – he believes reality projects like *Legal Queens* will be the main format for the vertical “genre” going forward. “You know that every major vertical streamer is already in the works right now to come up with their own version of [a vertical reality format].”

The main sticking point so far for producers, says Singh, has been trying to figure out a version of their series that can be realized within the typical budget for the streamer, which he puts at between \$200,000 to

\$225,000.

For *Legal Queens*, that means no extravagances like dolly and drone shots, but it did mean room in the budget to hire an ethicist, David Parker, so production would be able to protect themselves as well as the firm. For Beech, the lack of filming options is an asset to the medium.

“This is the perfect form for really getting to know people, because [with] horizontal, you get the sweeping scapes ... but with a vertical, you really get the person. You get that character. The most you might get is a two-shot or a really well-established three-shot, but you really get the people.”

*Legal Queens* shot for 19 days – including interviews – with a crew of only eight. Naturally, this meant cutting down on equipment as well, including no crew van. “The benchmark is, we don’t carry more equipment than five people can carry in their hands and will fit on one cart,” says Gardner.

While Gardner explains they ended up with about six terabytes of footage – from a mix of 4K H.265 cameras and iPhones – it totaled much less than your typical premium cable reality show.

The limitations on budget and shooting also work in the series’ favor, with Gardner in conversations with Singh on up to four more production cycles per year thanks to cost-savings.

“If we’re shooting this in seven days and then doing interviews, then we can edit it in three months with fewer editors,” says Gardner. “It’s not as much of a stretch as you would think.”

Both Gardner and Beech saw no major difficulties in adapting to the more “fly on the wall” approach needed for a vertical series with a small crew and less equipment. In fact, Gardner called back to his time on *Below Deck* as an EP, in which the most interesting conversations happened away from the camera, or on *Survivor*, where junior producers were given cams, which often yielded reality gold.

The ease of transition also applied to the structure of the series. According to Gardner, the differences between horizontal and vertical in terms of pacing are few.

“The language of a horizontal show or a follow doc on a premium cable network, it’s all one- to three-minute chunks,” he says. “They [networks] found that the audience’s natural attention span for a scene is one to three minutes long.”

That language extends through to the entirety of each episode within the season, with the producers mandating that each one has a distinct beginning, middle and end. “Someone has to be able to watch the episode and feel like they watch an episode,” says Beech.

With the premiere of both Chera TV and *Legal Queens* fast approaching, the producers are eager for more opportunities in the vertical space, both because they’ve proven they can do it and because they see it as the future of entertainment.

“The market cap on this is crazy. The growth on this is insane. Everyone forever is going to have a phone,” says Beech. “Everyone forever is going to watch vertical and so it’s just not going away.”

(Photos: Chera TV/Neighborhood Pictures)