



### **Documentary short gives view of, reflections by 3 window washers**

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VIDEO: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-biz-0708-confidential-windows-20120708,0,3404484.column?dssReturn>

Window washer Jaime Polanco straddles the ledge of a Chicago skyscraper, preparing to go over the wall. As he always does, he makes the sign of the cross and then silently asks God to keep him safe.

"There are lots of people who die and leave behind young children," Jaime's younger brother, Sergio Polanco, says in a voice-over as this scene unfolds in a new documentary about the brothers and their crewmate, all Mexican immigrants working as window washers in Chicago. "Imagine how they feel dying. I've thought, 'I have to die, but if it has to be working, then let it be. Let it not be somewhere else, where I won't have life insurance.'"

Nadav Kurtz's 10-minute film "Paraiso," Spanish for "paradise," captures the hopes and reservations of the Polancos and Cruz Guzman, who work for Corporate Cleaning Services, Chicago's largest window-washing company.

The documentary short, told in Spanish with English subtitles, has won awards at four film festivals, including Tribeca, Seattle and AFI-Discovery Channel's Silverdocs. A local release date hasn't been set, but Kurtz has applied to enter the film in October's Chicago International Film Festival.

"It's pretty good insight into the stuff we do," Guzman said in an interview while waiting for a building manager to unlock the hatch to the roof of 515 N. State St. "They don't see us as the smelly window washer in the elevator, but in reality they see us for who we are. It's funny though, 'cause I always think that when we're hanging over the wall, everybody's so amazed and stuff. But as soon as we get into the elevator, they turn around, and they're like, 'Oh, God. What's that smell?'"

I hadn't yet experienced what it's like to stand on an unshaded roof, surrounded by glass and metal, on a day with a high temperature in the upper 90s. So I asked him to describe the odor.

"Sweat and dirty water," he replied.

From all angles, including cameras mounted on the workers, Kurtz captures the trio hauling equipment onto freight elevators before dawn, knotting the ropes on which their lives depend and descending from points so high only the wind blowing against the camera's microphone is audible.

Chicago's peaks of steel give the film grandeur. But the men ground the film in the reality of Chicago's deep class divisions. They are unable to participate in the lakefront lifestyle they observe through the windows they clean, and they acknowledge that in the film.

"I'd like to live downtown one day, but I know it would be difficult," says Sergio Polanco, 28, who lives in Berwyn. "Everything would go to rent and food, and that's it. So there wouldn't be much of a point, except to be able to say, 'Hey, I'm living downtown.'"

Kurtz then cuts to Guzman as he describes his own hopes. As viewers watch the crew buying breakfast from a food truck on lower Randolph Drive, Guzman says: "I've always wanted to walk down Michigan Avenue with a Starbucks. All relaxed, just like that."

On the roof of 515 N. State last week, as Guzman tied into the carpeted wooden swing he calls his "personal office," I asked the 21-year-old why he covets a stroll down Michigan Avenue.

"We're working in real important buildings and stuff like that," he said in English. "But I'm working. I'm not really enjoying the building itself. So it would be kinda cool if I (could) come down here as, we'll call it, a civilian, I guess. And just hang out and be part of the social life downtown, instead of just the workforce. ... It's not such a big dream, but it's something. It would make me feel better."

Kurtz previously worked full-time as an editor for a post-production company called Cutters on the 25th floor of 515 N. State. The idea for the film came from looking out his office window.

"Honestly, I wanted to do their job," Kurtz said. "The first time I saw them, I remember thinking, 'That's amazing. I would love to see what they see out there.' ... I Googled it, and I was really surprised no one else had made a film about it (in the United States)."

U.S. Equities Realty, the property manager of 515 N. State, put Kurtz in touch with Neal Zucker, Corporate Cleaning's chief executive. Kurtz, who lives in New York and was living in San Francisco while shooting the film in 2010 and 2011, began meeting with the company's window washers.

He expected to find thrill-seekers. Instead "at the bottom of the ropes" one day, he met the Polancos, whom he described as men "with deep thoughts."

"All of these (film festival) jury members, they always ask, 'How did you find these three incredible young men?'" Kurtz said. "I was just taken by their thoughtfulness, their attitude toward their families, their care for their families. ... It's not often people open up that much in a documentary."

As the Tribune reported from Mexico in 2007, most of Corporate Cleaning Services' window washers emigrated from a rural town called Garcia de la Cadena. The labor flow is believed to have begun four decades ago with one man, Refugio Ramirez, who worked as a dishwasher at the Congress Plaza Hotel and decided to moonlight on a crew washing hotel windows. He soon recruited a cousin and six friends.

"My dad taught me, but he's been doing this for 40 years, and next year he retires," Guzman said. "He works at a much slower rate. So when I came here, I kind of struggled because these guys are

the best in the city. I mean, they're real fast. With time, I picked up their speed, their own techniques, and they taught me a lot more stuff."

From the ground, the technique looks like ballet. Using a suction cup, squeegee and long, narrow brush, they repeat the same sweeping pattern on each pane. They always hit the corners, using the suction cup to anchor them for those long reaches.

They clean each window in about 30 seconds.

Corporate Cleaning's window washers, who are unionized, are paid a set amount per building, which is based on the building's size and complexity, as well as the estimated time to complete the job. That means that if one washer finishes the job in two days and another in three, the faster worker effectively earns more money. They can take that extra day off and get paid for it, but most move on to their next assignment to earn more.

The company describes this as a commission system, making workers ineligible for overtime, a position that has sparked a lawsuit. About two dozen current and former Corporate Cleaning employees, including Sergio Polanco, have argued in a pending federal lawsuit that their compensation has no relationship to what customers are charged. Thus, they are entitled to overtime.

Sergio Polanco told me he was no longer involved in the lawsuit, although court records indicate he is. In the film, he expresses gratitude for his job.

"I'm not rich, but I do know that if my parents became ill, I could help them," he says. "And I know that if I was in Mexico, I wouldn't be able to do that as easily."

And that is why the Polancos and Guzman — and generations before them — "go over the wall" multiple times a day.

"What'll we do when we go? Wash windows in heaven?" Sergio Polanco says over an image of the team working on a glass facade in lush sunlight. "We'll go wash windows in heaven so that heaven is clean."