

June 9, 2005

## You can't beat the view

### Despite the high-wire act, washers claim job security

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For anyone who has worked inside an office building, whether it's a three-story glass and steel box off the expressway or on the 49th floor of a Loop skyscraper, you've no doubt looked up from your computer screen and stopped to ponder the guy hanging outside the window patiently washing panes of glass with long, sweeping arcs.

How does he do it, you wonder, swinging from ledge to ledge, scaling the heights of buildings like a trapeze artist, battling wind and elements and spider residue.

"People view window washing on high rises as very dangerous because we're hanging off of buildings on scaffolds, but it's really not," says Neal S. Zucker, president and CEO of Corporate Cleaning Services, one of the city's fastest growing professional window cleaning companies. "We run a very stringent safety program.



Window washer Rafael Martinez squeegees the window clean at the Fine Arts building on South Michigan Avenue. (Joe Cyganowski/ Staff Photographer)

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## Windows

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These guys know what they're doing. They're trained and highly supervised. You follow the rules and don't have any accidents."

One of a handful of window-washing services in the city, Corporate Cleaning Services at 21 W. Elm St. sports a portfolio of some of Chicago's most high-profile commercial and residential buildings, including the John Hancock Building, Water Tower Place, the Thompson Center, Lake Point Tower and the Four Seasons Hotel.

In its tenth year of business, Zucker said he started the company when he noticed that an abundance of dirty windows on many downtown buildings.

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"I live in a high rise and I noticed the windows getting dirty and cleaned several times a year," Zucker says. "It's a recurring business. There's always a need, whether it's an apartment or office. There's a lot of business out there."

At the Fine Arts Building at 410 S. Michigan Ave., Juan Saavedra who manages the day-to-day operations for Corporate Cleaning Services, helps set up two of his workers for a day of cleaning the venerable Art Deco landmark's windows overlooking Grant Park. He inspects the equipment, making sure his workers are tied correctly and to secure places.

"No, I have no fear of heights," Saavedra says casually, who started out as a window washer in 1968. "It's just a job that you learn how to do. I love it."

The daily work assignments he set up the night before have already been changed twice this morning. In the world of window washing in the Windy City, the wind is something to be respected. While there may little or no wind on the ground, the wind at the upper floors can be an entirely different story.

"The wind can blow water and detergent back on windows that you've already cleaned, so the work is wasted," Saavedra says. "On windy days, we do the shorter buildings, and on less windy days, we do the taller buildings, like the Hancock or Water Tower Place."

Each building presents its own challenges. Small nuances in a building's design can also have a major impact on the time required to clean its windows by increasing or decreasing the number of drops or re-

quire the use of booms. Commercial buildings like Marshall Field's on State Street or the John Hancock Building not only have large numbers of employees to contend with, but also heavy tourist traffic. Ensuring safety on the ground is as important as ensuring safety on the ledges.

"We make sure people on the ground are safe. Equipment is tied off with bungee cords so it doesn't fall to the ground," Zucker says. "We also place safety cones around buildings so people don't walk directly under window washers working above. In 10 years, we have never had an accident."

The technology used in professional high-rise window cleaning has also come a long way. Saavedra recalls one of the hooks giving out on a rig early in his career when working for another company that left him dangling in mid-air. Today, there's the Bosun chair, a sort of swing that gives window washers more versatility in moving around.

"In those days, we didn't have the Bosun chair so more accidents happened," Saavedra says.

Rigging has also become safer, a lot of the apparatus used to hoist window washers up and down the sides of buildings is motorized, as opposed to the hand-cranked equipment of several decades ago.

Corporate Cleaning Services has fulfilled its own share of special requests. There was the

time that Saavedra and his crew washed the windows on all 64 stories of Lake Point Tower in one day, so residents could enjoy the view of the July 4th fireworks in Grant Park. ("We had 18 workers all over the outside of the building," he says.) Saavedra has also performed the occasional emergency caulk job, and removed dead birds off of window sills.

With safety as the company's top priority, it only hires experienced workers who receive sev- from the Service Workers Union that supplies the city its window washers. The city also has its own list of safety regulations regarding scaffolding. Zucker says that his company adheres to all OSHA regulations and equipment complies with national safety standards.

"In 10 years things have changed a lot," Zucker says. "Insurance costs are becoming a big barrier as well as liability and workman's compensation because of the profession's perceived dangers."

As for the benefits of clean windows, it's all about the view.

"What people pay in terms of living or working in a high-rise building, they want to enjoy the view," Zucker says. "Having clean windows enhances a building's value and appearance, and the city looks its best. It's taking advantage of all the great things to see in the city."