



Squeegee economics

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A Mexican town of 600 serves as a major employment pipeline to Chicago skyscrapers and their daredevil window-washing crews

GARCIA DE LA CADENA, Mexico — Refugio Ramirez has a pioneer spirit, roaming his unfenced ranch, tending to his livestock and enjoying the stomach-dropping views from the cliffs of this wide-open country.

Nearly four decades ago, as an immigrant in Chicago, Ramirez blazed a path that would transform his hometown. While working as a dishwasher at the Congress Plaza Hotel, Ramirez received a casual invitation from a foreman to moonlight on a crew that washed hotel windows 14 stories up.

Ramirez was probably the first resident of Garcia de la Cadena to work as a window washer in Chicago, according to cleaning company officials and residents in Mexico. He soon would help a cousin and six other friends get jobs. Three of Ramirez's sons would follow decades later, joining a labor flow that now seems to touch almost everyone in this tiny town of 600.

The young men of Garcia de la Cadena learned that the best way to move up economically was on the scaffolding that creeps up Chicago's skyscrapers. Their daring fuels an economic boost that keeps families and their hometown afloat.

The largest union window washing company in Chicago, Corporate Cleaning Services, says that about 80 percent of its 66 workers come from this tiny town or nearby communities. The pipeline has spread to other companies, and a stroll through Garcia de la Cadena finds more job leads under way, with Ramirez's advice often being sought.

In the United States, Mexicans are hacking up the carcasses of cattle, picking blueberries and accepting other jobs that often don't attract U.S.-born workers. To those, add taking a squeegee to glass while resting on a rocking scaffold 80 stories up.

"The gringos don't work in dangerous jobs," said Ramirez, 60. "But we know if we get ourselves into the windows, we'll find something better. Better than here, at least."

For decades, immigrants have come to Chicago and made their way up the city's rising skyline. Since 1896, at least 30 window washers have plummeted to their deaths, according to Tribune archives. Names like Petruska, Slazyk and Zakulkiewicz top these men's obituaries and reflect the Polish ethnicity of the past century's industry.

Hispanic window washers became the majority in the 1990s and now make up about 95 percent of Chicago's workforce, said John Zarris, a field representative for Service Employees International Union, which represents about 250 union window washers in the city.

At Corporate Cleaning Services, the firm for which the three-man John Hancock Center crew works, 65 of the 66 window washers are Hispanic, company officials said. (The one exception, the firm's oldest employee, is Polish.)

Company officials say Hancock Center employees all work legally, but former workers at other firms say illegal hiring isn't unusual.

The Mexican immigrant work force is one stitched together by referrals, especially through a relative on the inside opening the door. In Garcia de la Cadena, the ventanas -- or windows -- have gained a reputation as the quickest way for workers to thrive in the United States.

Executives at Corporate Cleaning Services say about 40 percent of workers earn more than \$40,000 annually, and some earn up to \$60,000. Most in the industry learn by word of mouth, mirroring pipelines in other states from Latin American nations, said Sam Terry, president of the International Window Cleaning Association.

Salvador Mariscal, part of the Hancock Center crew, said he had been working in the orchards of Washington and at a factory in Elgin, Ill., earning no more than \$250 a week. He didn't like the jobs but soldiered on for 10 years. As the oldest child, he felt a duty to support his mother, who had been left a widow in Mexico when his father was killed.

On 1st try, his knees buckled

Then a cousin told Mariscal, a legal immigrant, about an opening at a Chicago window washing company. In Garcia de la Cadena, he had heard of these lucrative jobs, including nearly mythical tales from family friend Ramirez.

But Mariscal still had a test to pass, one that had tripped up countless young men from his hometown. As a child, he had climbed only as high as the guava trees that dot the countryside. He once went up a 10-story building in Mexico City -- in an elevator.

So when it came time to climb the scaffolding for the first time, his knees buckled.

He thought about walking away, like many of his countrymen who last just days on the job. By sticking it out, he said, he has opened up new opportunities for his family in Mexico and his wife and two sons in Chicago.

"We all stay at the job for the same reason," Mariscal said. "Necessity."

Mariscal, 35, earns twice as much as he did, this time with union protections. His bosses are hundreds of feet below. And if the crew hustles and completes a building under its allotted time, they can take a few days off and still get paid.

The legacy of the pipeline to Chicago's skyscrapers reverberates throughout Garcia de la Cadena, a tidy town in the hills about 90 minutes north of Guadalajara.

Mariscal's mother, Obdulia Correa, agonizes at home every day she doesn't hear from her son. One time she visited Chicago and refused to even look up at the Hancock Center.

"The other day he called me; he said he was on the 70th floor or the 80th floor. You could hear the wind, the noise. Ay, I can't take it," Correa said during a chat in her home, where her son's photo hangs prominently above the couch.

"I don't want to see it. I don't want to know about it. All we can do is ask God to keep him close," she said.

But her son's daredevil profession, and contributions from three other children in the U.S., helped send her youngest son to college. Juan Manuel Mariscal remains in the town to help care for her, and now is a teacher at an elementary school.

The money sent home by window washers also helped build homes and open businesses. Ramirez said his sons' paychecks pay for his treatment for arthritis. In the main plaza, townspeople have built a statue in tribute to immigrants that reads:

"We recognize your effort and sacrifice in leaving your homeland and your people."

Not everyone has found the windows an escape. Juan Ortiz worked illegally for three years on a Chicago crew and loved the money. What he didn't love was dangling 50 stories high in the Loop. He lasted three years before quitting.

Now working at a liquor store in Garcia de la Cadena, Ortiz said he still gets nightmares that he is falling.

"You will suffer unpleasant things to go where the money is," Ortiz said. "But I needed to search for something else."

Strength in shared roots

In this high-stress lifestyle, Mariscal said the Garcia de la Cadena natives find strength in their shared roots. Mariscal's family goes back decades with the clan of Refugio Ramirez Jr., one of his fellow crew members. That helps when Mariscal asks Ramirez to secure his safety cord.

"Did you tie the cord right, Cuco?" Mariscal said he asks, using Ramirez's nickname.

"Like I was going to hang from it myself, brother," Ramirez responds.

"This is someone I trust," Mariscal said later. "With him, I have confidence I am safe."

In the town square, Refugio Ramirez Sr. said he dispenses advice to young men considering the pipeline to the skyscrapers.

His favorite spiel: "Secure yourself well. Don't look down. And don't be afraid. That's the main one." The connections came in handy recently during a project to repair the tallest building in Garcia de la Cadena, the 80-foot-tall Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. Chicago veterans donated harnesses and other equipment for workers to patch the steeple.

But when it came time to hire local workers to scale the structure, project organizer Genaro Larios found no takers. Maybe it was the pay, less than \$5 an hour. Or maybe all the intrepid laborers had made their way to Chicago, he said.

Whatever the cause, the town that exports a valiant labor pool was forced to import workers from Guadalajara to spruce up a civic jewel.

It takes the right type of person to hang from a building several stories high, Larios mused, but it also takes the right motivation.