

# HIGH ABOVE THE CITY STREETS

by Ariana Brookes

On a cold New York February afternoon in 2006, Carl Bing and Jeremy Burney were getting ready to wash the windows on the second floor of a residential high-rise building in the West Village. Carl, a window washer with 22 years of experience, tightened the metal and canvas safety belt around his waist, opened the large window, and climbed out onto the outside window ledge. He carefully secured the belt to the outer wall of the building, snapping the belt's large metal clasps onto the concrete "buttons" on either side of the outer window frame. Burney shut the window after him, and Bing began to clean the outside of the window with a soapy squeegee while Burney cleaned the inside.

This was an easy job for Bing. The ledge was comparatively wide and it was only the second floor. Other jobs find him dangling from the roof of a building in a bosun chair, or a rope decent system, high above New York City.

It's all part of the job for Bing and Burney.

"I was scared [of heights] at first," Burney said. "But then I got used to it." They might be working from scaffolds, thirty floors up, or standing on window ledges, or even rappelling down the sides of buildings in bosun chairs.

Brent Weingard, the owner of "Expert Window Cleaners," and Bing and Burney's boss, started cleaning windows in 1975, at the age of 19. "I was just looking for a job that would make a difference in people's

lives," he said. "I wanted to find a job that no one wanted to do."

He started out in Westchester County, where he put up fliers offering his window cleaning services. Over the years, Weingard's business grew, and he relocated to New York City. Most of the buildings he now services are residential high-rise buildings in Manhattan.

The majority of high-rise window washers are men, and, as is the case with most manual labor, many are immigrants to the United States. "A lot of companies rely upon



immigrant labor," Weingard said, "and some of them [the immigrants] have questionable legal status." Union window cleaners make a starting weekly salary of \$883, and Weingard starts his employees at an hourly wage of anywhere from \$12 to \$25.

The structure of a building determines how its windows will be cleaned. The average high-rise window washer works from a scaffold, although many window washers now use the bosun chair, or boatswain, a naval device which is used to fix ship mastheads.

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The chair is double anchored with two lines to the roof of a building, and window washers use little suction cups to help steady themselves as they rappel down the side. A bucket with supplies is attached to the chair. The bosun chair is light-weight and offers greater flexibility than a scaffold, and, according to Weingard, it is about equal to the scaffold in terms of safety.

The work can be tedious, and it requires great attention to detail. "You have to be focused, calm and methodical," Weingard said. "You might clean 30 windows in one drop [in the bosun chair], and you'll maybe do two or three drops in a row." Safety is a major factor in this business, and one mistake can cost you your life.

Stefan Bright, the Safety Director for the International Window Cleaning

Association, and Weingard agree that while a window washer could be injured by falling from a 30 story building, they could just as easily fall two feet from a stepladder. "I've seen some injuries," Weingard said, "but most that I know of occurred on a stepladder, not a scaffold or bosun chair."

While the work can be dangerous, it is also rewarding. "There is a sense of accomplishment and a certain pride in being able to work coolly in extreme situations," Weingard said. "You're [also] window sparkling," he added.

What Weingard, and his employees Bing and Burney, love most about their profession is that it allows them to work outside and see different parts of New York City.

"We're never in the same place," Bing said. "That's the good part about doing this job."

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