

# Window Washer Scrubs Chicago Skyline

By Vicki Cox on July 25, 2012



Ben Jenkins As a window washer in Chicago, Refugio Ramirez enjoys a job with a view, which can include Lake Michigan and the city's stunning skyline.

With skill and dexterity, Refugio Ramirez slides a soapy brush up, over, down and in a figure-8 across a glass pane before repeating the sweeping motions with a squeegee, flicking off the liquid residue, and moving on to the next window.

His work might seem monotonous—except that Ramirez, 38, is tethered to the outside of a Chicago office building by two ropes and working 50 stories above the ground, where vehicles below look like Matchbox toys and pedestrians look like ants. To stabilize himself while cleaning skyscrapers in the Windy City, Ramirez grasps a suction cup that he attaches to each window he washes.

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“I try not to look down,” says the Spanish-speaking Ramirez through a translator. “Otherwise I could get scared.”

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Working in the city that is the birthplace of the skyscraper, Ramirez has cleaned the outside of the 110-story Willis (Sears) Tower, America's tallest completed building, in addition to other towering Chicago high-rises such as the John Hancock Center and the Trump International Hotel and Tower.

### **Family tradition**

The job is physically demanding and requires balance, agility and safety and equipment skills. But each day when he drops over the side of a skyscraper, Ramirez is carrying on the work of his father, Refugio Ramirez Sr., who began washing windows in Chicago in 1970.

When the elder Ramirez started his high-rise career, he found the pay significantly higher than his previous job as a dishwasher. He shared his success with family and friends in his homeland, inspiring others in Villa Garcia de la Cadena, Mexico, to emigrate to Chicago in hopes of moving up the economic ladder while descending the city's tallest buildings. Today, 90 percent of Chicago's 250 window washers hail from the small Mexican village north of Guadalajara.

Ramirez Jr. began washing windows in 2002 and is one of three brothers who followed the footsteps of their father, who since has retired. Since moving to Chicago, he has become a permanent resident, along with his wife, Maria, 36, and their two children. A member of Service Employees International Union, Ramirez works on a two-man team with his brother Israel, 42.

The brothers clean tall buildings with a 10-gallon bucket with water, cleaning liquid, a brush, a squeegee, a scraper to clear spider webs and bird droppings, and two 600-foot, 60-pound ropes. On the rooftop, they secure the lines to permanent tiebacks and drop them over the building.

"Tying off is the No. 1 thing," Ramirez says. "That and making sure the safety rope

is hooked to my harness.”

To the main rope, Ramirez attaches a bosun’s chair, a swing seat that allows him to lower himself floor by floor and maneuver while he works aloft, cleaning windows on each level until he reaches the ground. Then he returns to the roof with fresh water to begin the process again.

Dropping over a roof with an overhang requires another maneuver. “I have to swing into the building like Tarzan and hope the suction grabs the window,” he says. “If it doesn’t, I have to repel down the ropes, return to the roof, and try again.”

### **Perils and predators**

While he’s working, Ramirez sees various reactions from building inhabitants. “Sometimes they get scared when they first see me hanging outside their window or when the suction cup thuds against the windows,” he says. “Other times they’ll wave ‘Hi’ or hold up notes saying, ‘Great job.’”

On taller buildings, such as the 1,127-foot John Hancock Center, Ramirez stands on a scaffold while he cleans each window.

“For smaller buildings of 30, 40 or 50 stories, you can use the bosun’s chair,” explains Charles Adkins, vice president and COO of Corporate Cleaning Services (CCS), Ramirez’ employer and Chicago’s largest window washing company. “Most prefer it to scaffolding. It’s faster, less likely to damage the building, and in an emergency, they can get to the ground within a minute—sometimes faster.”

While you can’t beat the scenery—which can include views of Lake Michigan, Navy Pier, the Crown Fountain at Millennium Park, and Chicago’s stunning skyline—the job definitely has its perils and predators. Nesting eagles and falcons sometimes attack the workers. A falcon once grabbed Ramirez’ hat and dropped it to the ground.

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“There’s nothing we can do about them when they get upset—except leave,” he says.

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And then there's the weather. Crews don't work in rain, lightning or winds over 25 mph, no matter the season. Wind is the biggest hazard.

"You don't want to be on the corner, start spinning, and get slammed against the building," says Mike Kelly, a CCS supervisor.

When she's downtown, Maria Ramirez won't look up at the skyscrapers, fearing she might see her husband dangling overhead. Still, it's possible that their son Fernando, 12, could become a third-generation window washer if he chooses.

"If it was something he was interested in, I would train him," Ramirez says.

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