

EXIT LINES



BENJAMIN BRINK/THE OREGONIAN

Window washer Ken Myers hangs from a high-rise in the Lloyd District. "I've been in the business for more than 10 years, and I still have fear of heights," Myers says. "But the ropes we use have a 6,000-pound breaking point, and you've got to learn to trust the equipment." Window washers have switched from scaffolds to rappelling because it saves time.

A rope, a harness, then down you go

By Mark Anderson
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Look up next time you're downtown, and you might spot Ken Myers rappelling down the side of a skyscraper.

A recent Friday morning found him atop a 16-floor building, double-checking his gear before taking the plunge. Myers, 37, uses rock-climbing skills to wash high-rise windows.

"It's a little unnerving just watching," says Gil Fitzpatrick, property manager at the 35-floor KOIN Center. "They throw a rope off the top of the building, and down they go. Maybe it's that little bit of fear that keeps them safe."

The job is called "hanging," and Myers feels the fear.

"I've been in the business for more than 10 years, and I still have fear of heights," he says. "But the ropes we use have a 6,000-pound breaking point, and you've got to learn to trust the equipment. Then it becomes just another job."

Myers climbed rocks as a youngster with the Boy Scouts and continued into adulthood. He was working as a janitor when, needing a day job to attend night school, he began to hang.

Hanging became the preferred method in the mid-1970s, according to Stefan Bright, safety director for the 650-member International Window Cleaning Association.

"High-rise buildings were cleaned with scaffolds since the 1940s," says Bright. "But rappelling techniques began catching on in the mid-1970s. Guys started cutting 30 or 40 percent of their time, and the method took off like wildfire. There was a lot of improvising into the '80s, but what really makes it work is new codes that make sure buildings have adequate tie-off points."

The hanger's tools are few: Ropes and harness. Gloves and glasses. Padded plywood seat the size of a shoebox top. Big plastic water pail. A squeegee and a mop-covered stick called a wand.

But the key to the operation is a suction cup the size of a coffee lid. Attached to a safety strap, the cup is transferred hand to hand via the windows, allowing hangers to hold steady and maneuver. The opposite hand switches between squeegee and wand.

Hangers hit the street, head back up the elevator, move the ropes and drop down for another pass, then another.

Rafael Vazquez, 31, has been with Myers since 1998.

"I did inside work when I started," Vazquez says. "I never thought I'd be hanging off a wall. But I learned by watching my co-workers. When you're out there for eight hours and it's really

cold or windy, you ask yourself why. Other than that it's an OK job. But I wouldn't want to do it forever."

Brett Gebhardt, 26, has been hanging for two years.

"When it's hot out I wish it was cold, and when it's cold I wish it was hot," he says with a grin. "I'm never happy with the weather."

But cube dwellers need clean windows, so most skyscrapers get the Spider-Man treatment three or four times a year.

Myers' most harrowing experience, a few years back, came while pressure washing the south side of a 17-floor downtown building.

"I undid my suction cup and got blown about 12 feet away from the building and around the corner," he says. "There wasn't any real danger, just a matter of letting the wind die down. But I decided to finish it up later."

Myers' company, Premier Cleaning Services of Gresham, hit \$40,000 in December billings. He has six employees, and his four full-timers can make as much as \$50,000 a year. January is usually slow, then business picks up.

Now Myers is adding painting to the corporate menu. The crew recently finished the skylights on KOIN Center's south-side atrium for much less than a painting company would charge.

"He can do so many things," says Carolyn Ice, operations coordinator for Ashforth Properties, which owns a slew of tall buildings in the Lloyd Center area. "He repairs flagpoles. He fixes cracks in windows. He changes out light ballasts. He's very versatile."

A foot injury keeps Myers from heavy rock climbing these days. But he still gets out with his sons, 7 and 11. He says he wouldn't discourage them from hanging — by clear consensus, a younger man's job.

"That's why I'm working on the company," Myers says. "I don't want to be climbing over the side of a building when I'm 50." ■