

An Office in the Sky

Alex Rhodes has some words of caution for anyone looking into his line of work.

“If you think you’re gonna fall, you should probably just stay on the ground.”

Sound advice for anyone considering a career as a high-rise window cleaner. But for 33-year-old Rhodes there are no second thoughts.

Rhodes works for King Kong, a Denver window cleaning company that focuses its business on route and chair work. And for all you out there who think the windows of tall buildings are cleaned by men lowered to the ground on 6 foot platforms know as ‘stages,’ you have a thing or two to learn.

Chair work, as it’s called, is window cleaning done with ropes and a harness which are very similar to the equipment used by rock climbers. This type of window cleaning requires a thorough knowledge of knots, a keen ability to balance one’s weight in midair, and a lot of guts.

Rhodes, who has worked as a window cleaner for eight years, five of those with King Kong, says his company is special because of this type of work and the freedom it allows them.

“We do all the buildings no one else wants to do. We do all the older, weird buildings.”

Which is fine with Rhodes, who got into the business partially because of his love for old buildings and architecture. Walking downtown with friends 10 years ago he looked up to see a window cleaner working on the old Denver Gas and Electric Light Company Building at 15th and Champa.

“I could do that job,” said Rhodes. “So I went home and looked in the classifieds and sure enough, there was a posting for a window cleaner.”

Rhodes began his career doing route work, driving a company truck on a set route and cleaning the windows of franchises like Red Robin and Applebee’s and occasionally working at

residential. So for a while he never got off the ground.

Rhodes decided to return to window cleaning following a short stint as a factory worker.

“I used to stand there and look outside and think, ‘I used to work outdoors.’”

Now Rhodes works in what he calls the best office in the world, an office in the sky.

“It’s got to be one of the easiest jobs on the planet. We have no regulation, there’s no boss ever looking at me.”

Rhodes explains that when he began high rise work 4 years ago no certification was necessary for him to make the leap from route to chair work. He simply trained with other workers who had experience and took a test required by King Kong to prove his knot tying ability.

Despite the uniqueness of his job, Rhodes does not view his work as dangerous. This is a perception perhaps brought about by OSHA, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and their views of chair work.

“OSHA really doesn’t know how to regulate us very well,” said Rhodes. “They don’t quite understand us.”

Even though it does not rank as one of the top ten most dangerous jobs in the United States, a 2004 report by Churchill Insurance lists window cleaning as Britain’s most dangerous profession. A spokesman for the insurance company calls window cleaners “circus performers without the safety net.”

This is a description Rhodes wholeheartedly agrees with. He cheerfully whistles a few bars of “Under the Big Top” and explains that he often greets awed office workers with the phrase, “You didn’t know the circus was in town?”

Rhodes has numerous odd tales of his profession, from moving office furniture with Ed

McCaffrey of the Denver Broncos, to cleaning the windows of the Lucent Building in the Denver Tech Center in a Spiderman costume on Halloween.

But one of his favorite stories involves the time he was mistaken for a jumper while cleaning the widows of Sherman Towers, a high rise apartment building located on 11th and Sherman. It all began with a woman sunbathing on a rooftop. Rhodes and a coworker stumbled upon the bathing beauty while beginning the first of two days of work at the building.

“So we walk up to the roof,” Rhodes says, “And we’re like ‘Whoa, check that out.’ Cause we’re up on another roof that’s a little bit higher. So we look, we work, we clean windows. The next day the same girl came out again. ‘Wow, she does this every day, that’s all right.’”

The pair continued work on the second day but found themselves stretching out their time to make the job last all day.

“So I took a break,” Rhodes says. “And it’s no big deal for me to just sit like I’m sitting in my chair right now with my feet hanging over the side of the building. I sit on the edge and just take a break. It was great. I could look over: Bikini, city view, bikini.

“So I sat up there until I got bored of that, but while I was sitting there I heard the fire trucks and stuff start coming down the road. I could see them too, because I’m pretty high up. I think it’s an eighteen-story building. I thought, ‘Something’s going on and it’s downtown.’ But there are fire trucks every ten minutes. Whatever.”

Watching the trucks pull up Rhodes realized that whatever was happening was happening nearby. Despite the commotion he returned to his harness and descended the building watching as fire trucks, ambulances and police cars swarmed below.

“I got about halfway down and I see the building manager and the cops come around the

corner, and the building manager points at me. The cop looks at me and shakes her head. They were parked right next to my truck- King Kong Window Cleaners.

“I just looked at them and waved, ‘Hi. What?’ I get down and walked into the building. The whole office laughed and said, ‘All of Denver was coming out here for you.’ I was like ‘Was that all for me?’ And they were like, ‘Yeah somebody from the Anthem building over there thought you were a jumper.’ I said ‘I am a jumper. I jumped off this thing probably fifty times.’”

Despite working on some wonderful old buildings and some newer more modern ones, Rhodes has never had the opportunity to work on the old Denver Electric Building that first inspired him to his profession. And he may never get the chance.

“I’m already starting to think about doing something else,” said Rhodes. “It’s a young man’s job.”