



*Left:*  
Two of Phil's employees with Sörbo Samuelsson and Giulio Guizzi at an IWCA Convention

*Right:*  
Phil Alexander



Photos courtesy Phil Alexander

# AWC Interviews Phil Alexander

## Inventive & Resourceful, Phil Enjoys his Business

by Richard Fabry, publisher, American Window Cleaner Magazine, Point Richmond, CA

### AWC: How did you get into window cleaning?

**Phil:** It was in 1967 working in a car wash in Detroit Michigan that I washed my first window. As the car traveled through the car wash I would get inside and wash the front window, working 12 hours a day on weekends for a \$1.25 an hour.

I also worked with my father at a Coney Island and with him I learned value of hard work. The dirty trays that had to be washed were as high as me (that might not be so high for some of you but at 16 they seemed high to me.)

Later that summer of 1968 in downtown Detroit, I learned the important lesson, Jim Hendrix live concerts were out of this world. It was the golden age of rock and roll and I was right in the middle of Motown and loving every minute of it.

After my hippie days, I found that I was really looking for something that would give me a better life. I found a love of the Bible and a new career in window cleaning at the same time. After my Baptism in 1970 a "brother" offered me to work with him in window cleaning and there started my introduction to this great business. I have been window cleaning for 33 years and if you count the car wash, you could add another two years.

### AWC: What kind of window cleaning did you do back then?

**Phil:** After graduation in 1971 I started to sub-contract 11 Kentucky Fried Chickens for \$2 a store, three times a week from C Clean window cleaning in Detroit, MI. We did mostly route work and some homes. .

You would just finish a job in the middle of winter, and a car would come buy and splash dirty snow and water right back on the window. You did have job security back then.

I wound up doing the route and bid work on the side until I had enough to break off and start my own business. **Back then in 1972 I was doing around \$10 an hour which at the time was good money and I just worked** one day a week and lived at home.

Then I moved to Tennessee where I started over again. The only supplier in the area was Detroit Sponge. We thought we were in window cleaning paradise because there was a whole wall of just window cleaning supplies. Back then, you used only a five-gallon bucket and a camel or horse-hair brush along with a small wooded pole. With a handful of TSP and your leather chamois you could handle almost any window. This all would fit in the back seat of my 1969 VW. By the time I started to have my own route of banks and Lum's rest aunts we were up to \$7 an hour in 1971.

### AWC: How did you end up in Tennessee?

### nessee?

**Phil:** In 1973 a friend of mine Ron Polish and I went to visit Tennessee in the middle of a Michigan winter. When we got there it was 60° and there was sunshine so we both moved down south.

### AWC: How did you start a new route?

**Phil:** We bid all the banks in Cookeville, TN. We made around \$250 a day that we would split. We just finish cleaning the same bank which is now Union Planters and It was over 30 years ago that I clean it for the first time. We get \$975 now and are able to clean the whole job in four hours with six people: [www.unionplanters.com/](http://www.unionplanters.com/)

But Oak Ridge was mine to keep, and after my wife Diana and I were married in 1975, we moved there. (Notice the poles in the picture of my VW). I also would carry a 32-foot ladder on the VW. Diana, at first worked with me but over the years she felt better if I did the window cleaning by myself. (It might have been the standing on a window jack out a fourth floor school window doing construction cleaning.) (Window jacks were like a small diving board that clamped on the wall).

Back then we would ladder most jobs and using a 32-foot ladder was not a problem when you are in your 20's. Now at 50, I try hard to work smarter. We now use the pure water pole for most

of the work we used to do with ladders. Diana's father started to work with me in 1978, and nine months later we doubled the business and he was able to start his own. We were better apart than together but he did teach a me lot on running a business more efficiency. My mother-in-law did the books and would count the money to the penny. No free lunches!

**AWC: How did the business grow?**

**Phil:** We actual grew with the banks and restaurants who were customers.

When I was 18 years old and just starting out it was the freedom from having to work a 40-hour week. Now it is having more time to enjoy the different hobbies like digital photo, and video taping, golfing, fishing, and my ministry. I also build my own computer system and do beta testing on different software.

The window cleaning business should give you more time to do the things you like.

I still remember my first bank jobs and how it felt to really get a large job that would take two days for \$300. We would ladder everything back then, but even then I was using a sprayer to apply the water – which we still do after 30 years!

**AWC: How did you grow your business from a one-man operation?**

**Phil:** I put together a five-year business plan to increase my window cleaning

business. The first year we were able to double it and the second year increased it 30% more. I knew I had to make money by hiring other people and by doing add-on services and this how I came to have employees.

For over 20 years I would only work three days a week and the other days involved in my ministry. In over 30 years I have only worked a 40-hour week for about eight months when I worked with my father in law in 1978. In 1995 I started a second business, and when we sold it, we were \$166,000 in debt with me being responsible for over \$75,000 of it on credit cards.

Even though I was receiving \$1,400 a month I knew it would take way too long to pay it off. It was window cleaning that pulled me out of that mess along with a lot of prayer.

We now have three full-time and three part-timers along with two sub-contractors. I like to bring my employees to the convention every year to get the safety training and we all have a good time. My girls really do a great job and I feel an all girl window cleaning crew is something that should be considered if you do a lot of homes. But we train them for the high-rise along with the guys and we find that they take safety seriously.

**AWC: What improvement in equipment have you seen?**

**Phil:** The waterfed system has made our job so much easier.

It used to take eight hours with ladders, now we do the same job in three hours with no ladders using only poles inside and waterfed pole system outside. That is one of the greatest improvements in the window cleaning profession is the ability to clean four-story buildings from the ground using water

fed systems.

**AWC: You like inventing and modifying tools. Give us examples of inventions?**

**Phil:** Over 30 years ago I found out about using a garden sprayer and have been trying to perfect it ever since. We find that it speeds up production. I wanted to come up with a way to copy the auto assembly line. We found out if we used a 15-gallon sprayer you can keep one person spraying and another person scrubbing. The other two squeegees along with one getting drips (five-person crew) you have the ability to do production window cleaning with the average of \$200 an hour. This works well if the crew chief can do the spraying and keep the crew busy or you can limit it to a three-person crew with one spraying, one scrubbing, and one washing. The advantage of this method is the ability to do large commercial buildings without getting the crew too tired before the job is done.

**AWC: What other ideas have you incorporated in your business?**

**Phil:** Tools of the trade:

Sörbo squeegee with adjustable Ledger handle.

Sörbo 2-to-5-foot adjustable pole.

Solo garden sprayer 2.5 or 3.5 gallon: [www.northerntool.com](http://www.northerntool.com)

Luggage cart and small garbage can.

Used plastic pcv pipe.

By putting this all together in a small luggage carrier you are able to have everything you need right in front of you. It was always a pain to run back to car to get something that you needed. By training your new employees with this system they don't know any other way and it is faster on route work be-



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Phil outfitted in a clean suit for work in a medical facility.

## Shine Software

Not clear >>



cause you only scrub the middle of the window where the dirty marks are. The spray reaches all the other areas of the window.

This is one system we have been using for over 20 years and I feel it works the best because there is less drips to get and when you reach an office you can leave the sprayer in the hall and just bring in the wand.

**AWC: What equipment would you like to see?**

**Phil:** A small squeegee that will wipe off the top and side edge of the window frames at the same time.

I would like to see some type of system where a small sprayer and pole with the squeegees hooks onto the ladder. We do use a small quart sprayer we get for \$10 from orthern Tools and it works get inside for doing homes.

**AWC: What did you learn from your first IWCA convention?**

**Phil:** That there was so many companies making so much more money than myself by using employees. I usually would just give the extra work away causing my own competition.

***After that convention instead of hiring on an employee my subcontract labor I foolishly let him go after all that training in Nashville he went on to start his own business and has done very well at it.*** It is so much better to train new help as employees with non-compete agreements and also never train them how to bid or even have them meet the one who pays you if possible. You don't want to cause your own competition if you can help it. If I was to get 10% for all the window cleaners that I have trained over 30 years I would have a nice retirement

package by now. Yes do train others to clean windows but have agreements in writing before they ever learn anything for you.

Also when I saw the pure water-fed systems at my first convention in Nashville, TN they were truly amazing to me. I wanted one but the cost I felt at the time was too high. Now I wish that I just bought one. I went to the Yellow Pages and called all the water companies to see if they could make me a portable water-fed system. My first was a converted home R/O 125-gallon-a-day system in two 40-gallon tanks that were installed in my '93 AeroStar Ford van.

**AWC: How did that work?**

**Phil:** It was only powered by the pressure of the water from the facet and even after I doubled the system it was not enough water in the time I needed it. (100 gallons in 24 hours time.)

**AWC: What did you do?**

**Phil:** I started to search the internet under water, pure water and reverse osmosis. We found an electric unit that was small and could produce 500 gallons a day: [www.wateranywhere.com/Item/AA%2D22521TP.htm](http://www.wateranywhere.com/Item/AA%2D22521TP.htm)

It has worked well at the shop but not at the job site, because a lack of sufficient water pressure would cause the motor to burn out. That is why I cherish each issue of the AWC and the trade show. After reading about and taking to the different manufacturers the about the different systems. The one that works on the job for us was the 900 a day R.O. from Pure Rinse with the attach DI unit. <http://www.purerinse.com/anywhere/>

This took care of the low water pressure problem and we had enough

water for two poles. We used the 500-gallon electric a day unit in the shop to produce the water at night so the van is filled before the day begins. We used an electric timer and a water meter that turns off both the water and RO unit after either so much water goes through or after so many hours that are set on the timer. Both these units require little maintenance if your water pressure is high enough.

You might have to use a 40 psi limiter valve on the unit if the water pressure is too high over 75 psi. It is important to keep the pressure below 40 psi if you only are using a di tank and normal water pressure or the di will not work as well. The key to these units is having a tank to fill up so you can keep enough water going for the jobs. We just use rented DI tanks but I feel the best results are when you used the reverse osmosis units to bring the water down to 0 TDS.

The DI will give it the finish to produce the best results and your DI tanks will last much longer depending on your local condition of your water. If your TDS is in the high 500-800 your will find it harder to use this kind of system. Our water from the tap is 70-100 which is not very bad at all. If you just rent a DI unit from a water company and use what poles you have at least you can be safer then climbing ladders! Yes we use this system on all our homes too.

**AWC: What other kind window cleaning jobs have you done?**

**Phil:** I could write a book about the different window cleaning jobs, but here is a list of the most interesting jobs we have done:

- **Bird-control on a six-floor building.** We did this bank and put the plastic ones in double rows but you need

to use the cleaner and the glue they provide because we tried using other brands and they do not work as well. Clean up is messy and we do not promote this service. One job was a white stucco building and I found this spray paint that matched and painted the plastic spikes to match, you hardly notice them.

- **Cleaning elevator glass.** This is fun but dangerous work and in many areas you need special licenses and permits. We have a six-floor bank elevator we do once a year. The right way is to have the elevator service man run it while you clean the windows.

- **Caulking six-floor buildings.** If you just have to caulk a leak without taking off the old caulking, this is some of the best money you can make. You want to use a dark color if you can and avoid using clear because it will not last as long. Cutting out the old caulking takes a lot more time but sometimes this is the only way to do it right.

- **Pressure washing 100-year-old buildings.** The difficulty is lead paint which has its own problem and you need to find where you can get rid of it. You have to avoid the storm drains and you might have to contain the whole area in plastic.

- **Cleaning glass in a medical building dressed in a clean suit.** They give you this paper white suit and hat, mask along with boots. You get a lot of funny looks but I have some great painter suits if I ever needed them (*see photo on opposite page*).

- **High-rise cleaning in 125-year-old historical buildings.** No tie-backs and difficult jumps. This are another area we try to stay away from.

- **16,000 square foot home.** The first time requires a removal of paint

from every inch of window but the second time you hope to make back your money. It was a time-consuming job but if we do it again it should be much easier and there are other large homes nearby that we will bid on soon.

- **Window restoration.** We do this on low rise for \$2,600 twice a year. We also were able to restore windows with Winsol 550 and recaulk all the windows for \$12,000. The previous window cleaner used an acid wash each time. Then he came back after we have been doing the job for four years and re-bid the job for only \$600.

What were we going to do? It took two men to do the outside and the two girls to do the inside for a total of 64 hours and he was going to do it all in two days with two workers! I don't care that he said he has been in business since 1959. He told the building manager that they would bring a moving rig and tie off to the vent pipes! I told the manager that this was an unsafe and an OSHA violation. They agreed but still wanted me to drop the price to \$1,800 and include the dusting of the blinds. We agreed because we worked too hard to bring the building around and what my crew said is we could do the job with three of us hanging and four inside and get it done in one day! What a great crew!

If we could get rid of the low-price unsafe window cleaner we would all be better off. Perhaps we need to spend the money to send the I-14 to all the companies that supply liability insurance and they would not issue it to any who do not apply this new regulation. My other customer had the I-14 and when I mentioned about an engineer certifying the way we would tie back they just cancelled the job.

*See next page*



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## About the Cover

Cover created by Rose Barber.

The cover is a visual celebration of the infamous "S" stroke which many professional window cleaners use. Mastering this skill is one of the benchmarks which separates the professional from the amateur window cleaner.

Rose can be contacted at [rose\\_barber3@hotmail.com](mailto:rose_barber3@hotmail.com) or 510-839-9911.



Caption

This was OK because \$1,000 for 11 floors (50 drops) was too low anyhow. We have this to able to walk away from unsafe jobs or this I-14 will have a less affect then it could. We also need to have OSHA work with us when we find unsafe window cleaners without any backlash. Maybe a 1-800- toll-free line might help or the IWCA could help in some way, any ideas from any of you might help us. PS: We did the job in one day with seven people and still made our \$1,800.

As you can see we all have difficult times with unprofessional window cleaners. This aspect of window cleaning is not fun.

This is where the IWCA and the IWCCA will do a lot to help stop the unsafe window cleaners from both low pricing and unsafe employee safety practice.

I would like to see a new flyer that would only cost 50¢ each. We could put the highlights of the I-14 and state the importance of hiring only IWCA members. This might go along way in educating our customers in a very reasonable way.

When I was 18 years old and just starting out it was the freedom from having to work a 40-hour week. Now it is having more time to enjoy the different hobbies like digital photo, and video taping, golfing, fishing, and my ministry. I also build my own computer system and do beta testing on different software.

The window cleaning business should give you more time to do the things you like.

**AWC: An add-on business you'd especially recommend?**

**Phil:** A service which has great potential for profit is chemical cleaning. A little soap and bleach solution with (10 gallons of water to one gallon of beach). We able to charge \$2,000 for the chemical clean and \$850 for the window cleaning. It took 10 hours with seven people. We could have cleaned it faster with another pressure washer to put on and rinse the solution off.

If you were to used a pick up truck with a 100-gallon tank and small Honda pressure pump, you could go to three to four floors from the ground. Remember to close off the doorways or you might be buying a new outfit for someone. Also check with EPA for your water collection and never have any water run off into the storm drains. You can average \$750 a day with two workers which is a better return then most window cleaning. Check this out in Dallas with the power washers that will be with us 2004.

**AWC: How do you look for new business?**

**Phil:** One way is call the janitor businesses and offer to clean the glass they cannot reach. We have over the years added a lot of new work once the janitor companies have moved on. One bank changed the janitor but gave us all their branches four times a year. They like workers they can trust and it is work

**Winsol  
pick up from  
issue #97  
page 35  
b & w  
"Crystal  
Clear"**



we do during the day.

**AWC: How do you promote your company?**

**Phil:** We advertise in all the real Yellow Pages and Yellow Book. And by having a web site.

**AWC: How do you manage to get whole shopping centers?**

**Phil:** Companies that manage whole shopping centers and commercial offices are also a great thing to go after. A third of our yearly work comes from this source. This is also one of the ways to grow a business in a short time, why bid one job at time when you can service the

Breakout quote here

whole shopping center once a month? Your price usually is lower but you make up for it by less driving and invoicing.

**AWC: How important are customer relationships?**

**Phil:** They mean everything because it is next to impossible to live down a bad reputation. A good relationship with a facilities manager will always be to your benefit when the competition comes calling with a lower price.

**AWC: How do you use the internet?**

**Phil:** We have web site <https://www.nowccorp.com>. We have included pictures of some of the jobs we do.

The internet under [www.servicemagic.com/servlet/HomeServlet](http://www.servicemagic.com/servlet/HomeServlet) is also a way to get work. It cost \$99 a year and \$9 for every referral you accept.

So far we have received four jobs which have paid for the advertisement. We will start to e-mail our invoices as soon as the vendors agree. QuickBooks are set up to do this.

**AWC: What about e-mail?**

**Phil:** We are starting to get more communication this way and our e-mail: [wedewwindows@netscape.net](mailto:wedewwindows@netscape.net). We put in "dew" windows because we spray the water on, so the play on words helps people remember us more.

**AWC: After 30 years in window cleaning what are your plans?**

**Phil:** We do have a system in place that lets us leave for a week to ten days

And all the work gets done. Some of our vendors we serviced for over 25 years. If any out there would like to live in the green hills of TN, make me an offer and I might just really retire. We will sell our Knoxville monthly route this summer.

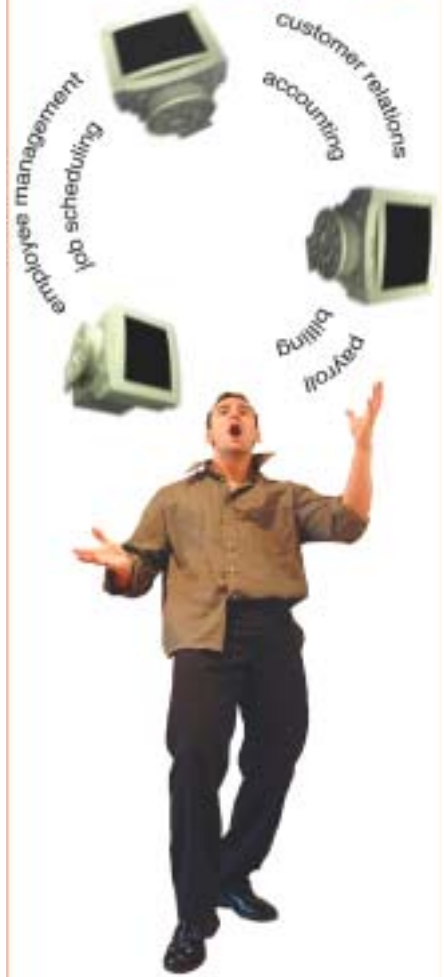
We have changed our name to We 'Dew' Windows, Inc. and started a new C. Corp. This way we can add a medical saving plan which helps you to deduct though the corporation most of your medical bills. I was able to do most of this online and most states give you the ability to download the forms to incorporate and change you name along with transferring you forms like Federal Tax Id/Ein <https://sa2.www4.irs.gov/sa-vign/issueEIN.do> Incorporation My Corporation.com [www.mycorporation.com](http://www.mycorporation.com) 1-888-692-6771 also will help you to file all the forms very reasonably.

*See next page*



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Caption

It would be fun to design window cleaning equipment or be some type of consulting work.

**AWC: Random thoughts?**

**Phil:** Window cleaning has been a challenging business and I have no regrets. If you are just starting out don't try to do it all alone but either subcontract or hire employees because without having them you only have a job not a business.

If you're into a large business take time with your family and kids. The business can live without you a day or even a week or two. Make window cleaning work for you not you for window cleaning.

Also going every year to the IWCA convention no matter where it is, is a way to keep abreast of what is happening in the industry nationwide.

The speakers have been great and Paul West has brought us to a new level. [www.2020windowcleaning.com/flash/index.htm](http://www.2020windowcleaning.com/flash/index.htm) Garry Jalowka of Mr. Window & Company Lake Elsinore, California is going to carry on that tradition

**AWC: Someone asked me one time, did I find fulfillment in window cleaning?**

**Phil:** My answer was no, but I did find good way to make a living that would give more time for the more important things. Yes my faith in my God is important and my pioneer ministry has brought me untold blessings. My service days are the highlight of my week but I have to admit it is hard for me not to talk about window cleaning.

When you go off your first jump of the day and your heart rate jumps several beats you really know you're

alive. Over the years, perhaps my influence on 50 different persons to start window cleaning businesses could be considered crazy. But if it has helped some to find more time for God and their families, then it was all worth it.

**AWC: What do you feel about the last 30 years in window cleaning?**

**Phil:** I feel the AWC and the IWCA have done a great job in education of the small one-man window cleaning. I feel they have helped me to expand my business in a much more professional way. With the ICCWC large companies and small one will have a training program they can promote among their employees and customers.

**AWC: What are some of the tricks of the trade?**

**Phil:** If you don't mind bartering, you can just about trade for anything you want.

We barter at the country club for two rounds of golf and at another golf course we get four rounds with a golf cart. Some of the better restaurants will give you the 50% employee discount for food while you work there. You can barter for your accountants and lawyers by doing their homes but according to the IRS this does count as income (fair market value) so we do count the wholesale value of these services as income.

**AWC: After 35 years of window cleaning what insights can you give?**

**Phil:** Get someone to help you as soon as possible and train them to do the work when you are not there. This will give you the most freedom and help you



## How to Advertise for Free

by Phil Alexander, *We Dew Windows, Oak Ridge, TN*

- Let others advertise for you by calling all the janitors in your local Yellow Pages and offering to sub-contract their window cleaning.
- Submit news releases about your business.
- Offer 10% to other companies to refer you. Glass and painter contractors, maintenance, home builders and realtor company's.
- Call the facilities manager in each large building you are interested in and acquire a working relationship so they will refer you to others in their field.
- Join the IWCA and the local Chamber of Commerce (we trade for one window cleaning to pay for our yearly membership.)
- Go to any local business meeting to promote yourself and your company.
- Hand out bid sheet's and cards to the clientele in your accounts.
- Offer 10% or more off to every call from one of your ads or referrals.
- Offer your customers personal discounts if they will refer you to others.
- Use e-mail and websites to advertise your business.
- Write articles for the *American Window Cleaner™* and give them to your clients.

work on your business and not in it. If I understood this concept 30 years ago I would be now on houseboat fishing somewhere like Aruba! The sooner you trust someone to do the work you will start having a business and not a job. You take care of the money or at least always keep an eye on it, but let someone do every thing else.

Window cleaning should give you more time to achieve the higher things in life like, family, and God, and friends. I once read a story that said what you remember in life is not the great people you read or hear about but the people who make a difference in your life, your first-grade teacher or coach, or the guy that first taught you how to clean windows! I feel we should try to be that small person that makes a difference in some-one's life! Window cleaning has given me that kind of time to help others and for that I will ever be grateful to the business that has given so much.

**AWC: Thanks, Phil.**



Caption

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