

For 1 World Trade Center Window Washers, First Came Panic, Followed By Calm, Then Rescue

By Darran Simon

They panicked at first. But the two window cleaners dangling 700 feet in the air said their training kicked in and they relaxed, and waited to be rescued from 1 World Trade Center on Wednesday.

Juan Lopez and Juan Lizama Friday recalled the sense of peace they felt as they hung, stranded near the 68th floor, tethered into a scaffold.

"In the beginning, it was panic and pretty much survival . . . But a few minutes after that you kind of clear your mind and try to get a hold of the situation," Lopez, 33, said Friday at a news conference at the Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ Manhattan office.

He said: "It's hard to say I was calm but with all the training, it's a peace of mind."

The two men, rescued after about 90 minutes by FDNY crews, recounted the harrowing ordeal in English and Spanish -- the phone call to reassure one worker's wife, the near silence between them as they waited and their relief at being saved

"I'm just honestly happy to have made it, got home to see my family another day," said Lopez, a five-year window-cleaning veteran. He and Lizama have worked at 1 World Trade for two weeks. Lizama, 41, a 24-year veteran and West New York, New Jersey, resident, said: "Thank you everybody," listing New York City firefighters and the union -- those who did "their part . . . in the moment."

The high-wire drama outside the nation's tallest building began at 12:42 p.m. when fire officials received a 911 call. The rig was tilted into an almost vertical angle, with one worker at each end of the platform that swayed outside the 68th and 69th floors.

"At the moment that the scaffold tilted, he was a little panicked, but they got control of the situation, and they were always in control of the situation because of their training and because of their experience," said union vice president Shirley Aldebol, translating for Lizama.

Training includes 18 months of classroom work and an apprenticeship, Aldebol said.

Lopez, who is from Peru, said his first instinct was to activate the emergency stop, a button that cuts power to the motors that lower and raise the scaffold. "That didn't work," he said. So, he held on, hoping they wouldn't fall.

"Once it came to a stop," he was relieved, he said.

John McDermott, president of the men's employer, Upgrade Services, said the men were not in danger of falling because they were tethered in.

"Even in this case of equipment malfunction, their diligence saved the day," McDermott said Friday.