

# NEAL ZUCKER

President/CEO, Corporate Cleaning Services

BY CARRIE WILLIAMS | NIMA TARADJI PHOTOGRAPHY

Walking into his apartment on North Lake Shore Drive, Neal Zucker gives an oral history about the building. “It was originally built in the ‘60s, and my grandparents used to live here,” he says with a nostalgic smile while gesturing to the exquisite molding and woodwork throughout the elevator. He pauses for a moment, then says, “I always knew I wanted to live here.”

Born in Chicago and raised in Winnetka, Mr. Zucker has fond memories of a childhood spent visiting his grandparents in the Gold Coast. “I remember my grandmother taking me to The Walnut Room...we had chicken salad and pot pies. That’s why I celebrated my 45th birthday there. I just had to!”

A modern-day Gatsby (without all the mystery), Mr. Zucker knows practically everyone in Chicago and they all know him very well. Collectively referred to as the FONZ, or Friends of Neal Zucker, hundreds of the city’s ‘who’s who’ have attended his memorable birthday parties, including his 40th at the top of the Hancock (before anyone had a private event there, he notes). But just when they think they’ve seen it all, the big 5-0 isn’t until 2016 and Mr. Zucker has the most incredible plan in the works: “To celebrate in New Zealand...for my initials, NZ.”

But how did Mr. Zucker come to know such fame and fortune in Chicago? All it took were two ‘Aha’ moments to achieve success as an entrepreneur.

## THE PATH TO SUCCESS

“Everyone wanted to be an investment banker on Wall Street at the time,” recalls the Chicago native, who graduated from University of Michigan in the ‘80s with degrees in economics and political science. “To do that, you needed an MBA. So I graduated from Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and started selling bonds at Dean Witter

Reynolds. But one day, I took a breath and said, “This isn’t really what I want to do.”

Racking his brain to think of a niche business he could either purchase or launch, Mr. Zucker went for a walk around the neighborhood, looked up and noticed buildings everywhere. And they needed to be cleaned...right? “So, I started a cleaning business and rather quickly someone asked, ‘Do you do windows?’” Without hesitating, he said yes and eventually “the business just shifted straight to window washing.”

Two decades later, Mr. Zucker has grown his client list from less than a handful to just under 1,200 that have thousands of buildings all over the city. As for competition, he says, “Only a few companies go after that type of work: the Prudentials, the Hancocks, the Water Towers. We’re very technologically sophisticated compared to our competitors. Plus, the regulations and insurances have changed so much over the years that it’s harder to break into the business. I’m lucky I took the leap when I did.”

Mr. Zucker also credits the company’s success, in part, to “The 7 Ps,” a mantra he shares daily with his employees: Prior proper planning prevents piss-poor performance. “I’ve been saying it for so long at staff meetings, I have no idea where I first read it,” he admits. “I also quote Ronald Reagan when he said, ‘Trust, but verify.’ I trust people, but I like to be proactive and verify. And finally, I don’t operate in gray areas. It’s black and white with me. If it’s gray, something is wrong.”

However, while every company faces challenges, one of CCS’ biggest, according to Mr. Zucker, is how to actually get to the windows. “The Hancock has its own machine, which we ride down. Some buildings have chairs and pulleys. Sometimes we bring scaffolding. It depends on the building. But we have very strict safety protocols, and I’m proud to say that after 20 years we’ve never had a fatality.”

## GIVING BACK

Aside from corporate success, Mr. Zucker says philanthropy is part of the fabric of Chicago and he considers himself lucky to have such a large group of friends that volunteer regularly alongside him. “We’re like-minded individuals who support each other in everything we do.” For Mr. Zucker, this includes board work at the Museum of Science and Industry, Goodman Theatre and Chicago High School for the Arts. “I cherish the civic involvement from our business community and want to give back as much as I can. As my business grows, I hope I’ll have the ability to do so in an even bigger way.” ■

## ZUCKER ABOUT TOWN

A man who dines out every day for lunch and dinner, Neal Zucker loves exploring the many neighborhoods to discover the best dining destinations in the city. But during the brutal winters, he prefers to stay in and around the Gold Coast. Lucky for him, the options are endless. Here are his top 15 choices...

1. Allium
2. Cape Cod Room
3. Fig & Olive
4. Gibsons
5. Jelly Fish
6. Les Nomades
7. Mirai Sushi
8. Mon Ami Gabi
9. NoMI
10. RL
11. Rosebud Steakhouse
12. RPM Steak
13. Shanghai Terrace
14. Tempo Café
15. The Pump Room

