



Towering marvels of engineering

Giant cranes change Valley skyline

Bert Sass
Special Projects Producer
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[Learn more about the crane operator school](#)

They climb 300 to 400 feet above the ground, building structures that may be 30 stories or more. A boom in high-rise construction has tower cranes jutting up in many places along the Valley skyline.

There are so many high rise buildings going up in the Phoenix area that there's a [shortage of giant cranes](#). One large supplier, [Stafford Tower Cranes](#), has an office in Scottsdale. And Patrick Stafford, one of the owners, spends much of his time at Valley sites where his cranes are working.

Stafford's company also operates a school for crane operators in Apache Junction. Trained operators are in high demand and typically start work at about \$35 an hour. The training program lasts just one week, but includes experience on a full-size crane--after trainees use a simulator.

[See what they learn at crane school](#)

Video produced by 12 News Photojournalist David Mills

Before a new building goes up, the tower crane has to be built. It goes up in sections and is secured to the side of the building it is helping to construct. As the building goes higher, the [tower crane climbs](#) itself to stay taller than the building.

Patrick Stafford says, during that process of climbing is when a crane is more vulnerable to accidents if mistakes are made. But any crane that rises hundreds of feet and lifts many tons at a time can collapse if there's a failure--human or mechanical. You can see pictures of a [2006 accident in Seattle](#) and a [1999 crane collapse](#) in Milwaukee.

Operating a giant beast of steel requires nerves of steel, but also someone who doesn't get lonely spending an entire shift all alone in a tiny cab. Operators even spend their brief lunch breaks up in the cab. Non-stop construction work depends on the crane to keep materials moving, so there's no time for restroom breaks either. And with no urinals up on the crane, the practical solution is to use empty water bottles, and climb down with them at the end of the shift--very carefully.

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