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Elevator business has its ups and downs: Congress declares October as National Elevator Safety Month

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Quick. What's the safest mode of transportation?

The answer is elevators. Accidents are almost nonexistent. Recently, however, Congress declared October 2010 as National Elevator Safety Month with the goal of promoting safety awareness to elevator passengers and educating the public about what to do in an emergency.

In the U.S. and Canada, there are over 700,000 elevators in operation and about 100,000 new installations annually. Every day, millions of people step aboard, press a button and, seconds later, safely arrive at the desired floor, taking for granted the elaborate contraption that enables you to defy gravity and travel hundreds of feet up or down at controlled speeds.

In southern New England, chances are you've ridden in an elevator installed and/or maintained by the retired Jack Powers or his sons John or Jeff Powers, who have a combined total of some 100 years in the elevator business.

"Every elevator has several safety backups," said John Powers, owner of Century Elevator Co. based in Quincy, which he founded in 1997. That year the senior Powers retired after more than 50 years with a major elevator firm that went out of business. Many customers followed the younger Powers to the new company.

While the economic downturn of the last few years has dampened Century's new installation business, Powers says his technicians have stayed busy, installing and servicing long-time customers, many of whom own or manage buildings.

If your elevator goes into free fall, what should you do? Powers said. "Today's elevators have many built-in safety backup systems, so there's little chance of failure." If you're in one that gets stuck between floors, he suggests:

- (1) Remain calm. Hydraulic elevators can't fall far;
- (2) Press the alarm button and/or use the emergency phone, or your cell phone;
- (3) Don't try to open elevator doors or to crawl into the shaft. Unless you're Agent 007, this will drastically increase chances of injury.

Besides installing new elevators and maintaining old ones, in recent years Powers added elevator design to Century's offerings. One client, owner of the Splash restaurant in Chinatown, wanted the elevator in his 4-story building to convey a certain image. "The owner wanted the elevator to follow the décor of the rest of the restaurant. We designed and installed exactly what he envisioned," Powers said.

In the early 1970s, John's father installed the elevator rails in Boston's 58-story John Hancock Tower, New England's tallest building.

The most interesting units that John works on are 'birdcage' style elevators, originally installed in the 1920s, that add to the charm of many of the Back Bay's most exclusive townhouse addresses.

Would Powers have liked to work on the bullet train shaped elevator installation at Taipei 101 in Taiwan, the world's second tallest skyscraper with 101 floors above ground, with pressurized cabins? Or on the world's tallest building, completed in January 2010, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, at 2,700 feet tall, 160 stories. "They've got 57 elevators. It must keep several people busy. But the commute would be tiring," Powers said "I'll stay closer to home."

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