

THE SUN

Today's impossible challenge, ladies and gentlemen, pits this standard Catonsville row home, the one with the oh-so-narrow-minded staircase, against this 700-pound, 6-foot-long, Baldwin grand piano. On our left we have the row home's prospective tenant, Adam Mahonske, a cheerful piano teacher at the Baltimore School for the Arts. He wants to move his piano, not into the front room of the row house -- for that would be a little too easy -- but upstairs where he will be able to operate a cheerful little studio.

On our right we have the mountainous Gurski brothers from Brooklyn, not the one in New York, the one in South Baltimore. David, at 235 pounds and 29 years, is the serious, younger one, the one standing just inside the foyer. His eyes are cast doubtfully at the sharp, totally impossible angle that the piano will have to take immediately to the left and then to the right once it passes through the main doorway -- assuming it does pass through the main doorway -- and then into the entrance to the enclosed staircase.

So: Gut-busting piano, claustrophobic stairway, optimistic piano teacher, two Polish-American guys from Brooklyn. Is the picture coming into focus?

David Gurski is frowning now at the low ceiling. Now he turns and frowns at his brother. "It's tight, Eddie," he says. "That first turn is tight."

One year older and possessed of a benign, confident smile that suggests the advantage of being the brother who is 85 pounds heavier, Eddie opens his palms and shrugs.

"We've got 2 inches to play with."

As D&E of D&E Movers continue their debate, Adam Mahonske places the challenge in perspective. First, if the piano can't get in, he isn't moving in. Second, this is the piano his parents gave him when he was 12 and he wouldn't be at all happy if it were, say, dropped down the staircase and turned into fiddlesticks.

"I've always moved my own piano," he says. "I'd borrow some pads and skid boards and I'd get a couple of friends." He pauses and peeks again at the narrow staircase. He shakes his head. "I never had to go up a staircase. No way on earth could I do this one."

L The question is, what way on earth will the Gurski boys use?

LET'S TAKE A MOMENT HERE to examine what we've got. Inside every piano there is a Rube Goldberg maze of delicate pegs and dowels and flanges and shanks, wrapped in felt and string and buckskin and paper and framed out in steel, copper and iron. When triggered by an ivory-covered key struck by a finger -- or if you're Jerry Lee Lewis, by elbow or cowboy boot -- a felt-covered hammer strikes a tautly stretched length of wire and the resulting sound is, well, nice. (If you're Jerry Lee Lewis it just sounds loud.)

The whole contraption weighs about 80 pounds and, so far, there is no need to call the Gurski boys. Trouble is, you need to anchor that intricate assembly in something, you need someplace to stretch those wires and while you're at it you might as well throw in some lacquer to make it look halfway decent and easier to dust. The resulting packaging adds a quarter to a half ton of weight and somehow qualifies it for the term piano, which comes from the Italian, meaning graceful or smooth or, well, nice.

Piano mover, however, is a conundrum, an odd contradiction of terms like jumbo shrimp or soviet union. For just as the blending of all that weight with all those delicate notes makes a piano a piano, it also takes a mixture of strength and grace to move the darn thing. Not that you always get it. After all, the piano mover's lexicon wouldn't contain the word "ding" or "nick" or "chiropractor" if all moves went smoothly.

"IT'S ABOUT AS TIGHT AS IT gets," says David Gurski in front of Adam Mahonske's row house.

L "It's pretty tight," Eddie Gurski grins to Arthur Fliggins.

Arthur is their East Baltimore-raised partner, the former U.S. Marine mortarman whom they call their third brother. He stands 6 feet even and weighs 245 pounds, and he is also the crew's bottom man.

Piano-moving crews ideally have three men: The top man is the guy who leads the way with his rear end and, going up stairs, lifts and heaves and turns red in the face; the bottom man is the guy at the bottom, or heavy end, who uses his back and shoulders to heave and guide, and who sees most clearly just how flat he will be squashed should the top man let go; the dolly man is the guy who lends a hand here and there but whose principal task is to keep repositioning the dolly on which the piano rests.

All pianos, whether the **upright** models or the smaller consoles or spinets or even the grand pianos, are lifted onto a special padded sliding board that is then rested on a dolly for easy moving.

And here is the first secret of the Gurski brothers' success.

"Other piano movers have dollies with the kind of wheels that wobble," explains Eddie. "When you're going down a hall, they can make the piano go crooked. It's hard to control."

But when David Gurski, out of high school 10 years ago, got a job moving pianos for the Piano Man in Catonsville, he learned of a special "straight" dolly made by the New Haven Moving Equipment Co. When his father helped him buy his own truck a few years ago and he and his brother went into the piano-moving business under the D&E name, David remembered the New Haven firm.

"I swear by that dolly," he says now. He watches as Eddie and Arthur bring Adam Mahonske's Baldwin, its legs and lid removed, the body wrapped in a massive canvas bag equipped with leather handles, up the sidewalk on their New Haven dolly. An unremarkable framework of steel tubing, the dolly has wheels that are made of soft rubber and are fixed in place. "Because when you have steps to go up," explains Eddie, "it doesn't wobble. You go through a doorway, you go through straight. It goes across hard wood floors without leaving a mark. "

Out of the dolly comes the term "toeman." For when you have a piano -- no matter how large -- centered by weight on a dolly, you can raise the dolly and piano together by using only the pressure of a toe and the principles of leverage.

At Mr. Mahonske's front steps, Eddie applies his toe to the padded slide board. His end of the 700-pound piano comes down, and the front end easily goes up. A fourth crewman named Tom Clark, only two weeks into his career as a piano mover, scrambles to pull the dolly from under the slide board. The board and the piano are rested gently onto the front steps at a diagonal. Mr. Clark repositions the dolly at the top of the steps and, with Eddie at the rear and Arthur in front, it is slid up onto the dolly. The hefty grand is now rolled easily across Mr. Mahonske's porch to the stoop of his front door.

Throughout this process the second secret of the Gurski brothers' success becomes clear. At every point where a maneuver must be performed or a lift made, these men pause and count aloud.

"Arthur, you call it," says David, now in position in the doorway as top man.

"One, two, three," says Arthur in his familiar bottom man role. At once, he, David, Eddie and Tom lift the piano up off the dolly and onto the floor.

"Other people hear us counting and they laugh at us," says Eddie.

"You've got to do it in unison," says David. "You've got to communicate all the time."

"The biggest part of piano moving is psychological," says Eddie. "The first time I picked up a piano I said, 'Man, you've got to be kidding.' "

"The first time I took one down a stairs it scared me to death," adds Tom. "When it comes off that top riser, it comes off quick."

"It's all up here," Eddie points to his head. "Once you got it up here, it's half the battle. When I first started, my brother would say, 'Can you handle this?' I'd say, 'I don't know.' He'd say, 'You have to know.' "

ADAM MAHONSKE'S MOVE IS different in two respects for the Gurskis. First of all, it's rare that four men are needed on a move, but this job is so tight and tricky, they could actually use their other two regular assistants, Billy Smith and Dave Beal. But both are busy on other jobs this morning. Second, 90 percent of the Gurskis' moves are done for one of the nine piano stores they regularly work with.

Like Dick Baker, owner of Used Pianos Inc., a Columbia firm that buys, rebuilds and sells old pianos. Mr. Baker, who is 50, used to move all his pianos himself and still makes what he describes as the easy moves on his own. For the tough ones, he calls the Gurskis.

"Piano movers are a strange sort of people," he says. "I knew a national weight-lifting champ who lasted in this business only three weeks. There's a knack to moving a piano. In fact, piano moving is an art. You have to lift with your legs, not with your back. Amateurs don't understand how to lift properly. That's why I'd never ask someone to move their own piano."

And he doesn't recommend that you entrust your piano to regular furniture movers either. "House movers don't move pianos enough to be familiar with all the angles or the weight distributions," says Mr. Baker. "The vast majority just don't know how. If you don't, you can either injure yourself or the piano or the property or all three. You can even kill somebody."

He has a favorite story, the kind you'd hope a piano mover would have. A couple of years ago, a two-man crew for a local piano store was delivering a piano up a narrow staircase.

"The guy at the bottom was pushing and they had a guy at the top," he says. "And the top man's fingers slip. The guy at the bottom sees it coming and is able to climb up on top of the piano as it's sliding toward him. And he rides it down the stairs. It goes through a solid plaster wall, it destroys the piano, it screws up the house and puts the guy out of work for three months."

Mr. Baker is just recovering from a badly wrenched shoulder, an injury caused by taking on a piano move that looked easier than it turned out. "Moving pianos is hard once you're past 40," he sighs, massaging his shoulder. According to the Gurskis, smashed fingers and pulled muscles are an everyday occurrence. David has separated a shoulder and broken a wrist, and Eddie is always setting a piano down on his feet. Arthur Fliggins says he has never been injured unless you count the time he smashed his toe and it turned purple and the nail fell off.

"That's why it's unfair to ask a neighbor to help you move your piano," says Mr. Baker. "You're asking them to put their whole future or career on the line. You can injure yourself. But people don't think. They've always been able to do stuff themselves, like move a refrigerator. I still don't know of anything I can't do, but there are things now I won't do."

THERE IS ONE HARD AND fast rule in the piano-moving business. You always ask the customer how many steps you have to go up, how many turns you have to make.

In fact, the cost of a move is based on those numbers. For instance, D&E charges \$80 to move a small 300-pound console piano plus \$2 per step. If the piano has to go up several floors, the entire base price of the move, as well as the per-step charge, increases. The charge for the Adam Mahonske move was \$175.

"A lot of people think they can move it themselves because it has wheels," says David. "How hard could it be? Then they move it across their hard wood floor and it ruins the floor. But a lot will call us for a price and say, 'Forget it, I'll do it myself.' "

"I tell them, 'In the long run we'll save you money,' " says Eddie. "I tell them, 'You don't have to use us, but you should use a `` professional.' Pianos cost so much money. . . . "

The majority of moves, he says, are only three or four steps into a house, although often people will completely mislead them.

"People will say it's straight in the door. You get there and it's three flights up a hill.

"You should always ask about the steps," says David.

"Although sometimes," smiles Mr. Baker, "we get trapped."

He once sold a piano to an elderly woman, dealing with her through a man who arranged the sale and the move.

"Per our conversation with this guy, he said we had a few steps to go up. I quoted a price based on two or three steps. We get there and it's raining, thundering and lightning. And see we have to go up a half flight of steps outside. Inside we have to go up a staircase that has a left-handed spiral and a turn and six more steps. When I saw that I said, 'Ma'am, we can't possibly do this for \$90. It's going to have to be \$175.' She started to cry. She said she was on a fixed income, she had no more money and

she'd always wanted a piano. [The other piano mover] looked at me and I looked at him. We couldn't help but do it."

ADAM MAHONSKE'S BALD- win is now off the slide board. Because the staircase is enclosed and so narrow and the ceiling so low, the Gurskis have decided to abandon the slide board and dolly and go with the piano bag for a better grip. The first hurdle to overcome is the turn from the front door foyer into the doorway leading to the staircase.

The first attempt features much grunting and sweating but no movement.

"You guys weren't talking to me," David gently chides his crew. While Eddie schedules all of D&E's move, everyone agrees that during a move, what David says goes. "I didn't know when you had it."

The four men reposition themselves, catching a breath. The weight of the piano has gouged deep grooves into Eddie's forearm.

"The only thing I'm worried about is the height," says David, already sweating. "Are you ready? OK, Ed? Say when. You call it, Art."

"One-two-three."

"We're in!"

But only inside the staircase. The toughest part is dead ahead.

"There's definitely a lot of physics and mechanics that go into a move," says Mr. Mahonske, watching closely. Arthur Fliggins, a one-time furniture mover, says something similar. "As much stuff as I moved in the furniture business, if I'd run into a piano before I met David, I'd have tried to muscle it," he says.

"There's not as much muscle required with pianos as maneuvering."

"Unless you're talking stairs," David corrected. "Then you're talking 90 percent muscle."

And that's what we're talking here.

The pungent perfume of four big guys sweating big time is filling the crowded narrow staircase. Arthur is crouched at the bottom of the staircase, his back and shoulders muscling up into the piano. Eddie is right behind him pushing. Tom is scrambling up to help David at the top, lifting and pulling.

"They are using one corner of the piano to just catch the stair tread each time," whispers Mr. Mahonske, like the color man at a golf match.

"Now we've got to get that next step," says David. "We need to make the turn at the top."

A friend suggested David get a job moving pianos out of high school. "I said, 'Pianos? How many pianos are there out there?' I found out. There's a lot."

On his first day on the job he was teamed with his buddy and a guy named Moose. Their task was an old **upright** which weighed in the 1,000-pound range. It had to go up eight steps and the guy named Moose couldn't hack it. "So my buddy talked me into doing it," says David. "And I did it. I was good at it. Pretty soon I was a crew chief."

Eddie's first move came when David bought his first truck and took Eddie and another guy to a move in Cumberland. "It was a big **upright**," says Eddie, nodding and grinning. "It had a very high polish. But it had to go up six flights of steps and then it had to be lifted up over banisters. The third guy in the crew said he couldn't do it."

"So Eddie stepped in," says David matter-of-factly. "And he did fine. I was impressed. It was 600 pounds."

The two brothers live together and run their business out of their Brooklyn row house. Their three trucks are garaged a few doors away. They put in about 70 hours a week and one or the other will usually volunteer to go out alone on a Friday at midnight to haul in a piano from a concert.

David's hair is dark, Eddie's a sandy blond. The only thing identical about them is their blue eyes and their voices; on the phone they sound identical. Otherwise, as with any brothers, there are differences.

"We argue a lot," says David. "It's mostly because I'm always right and he doesn't see it."

Eddie is also the musician in the family. When he was a kid he played the accordion for three weeks. "I got so I could pick out 'Three Blind Mice,'" he says almost wistfully. "When we go into a piano store, I hit a few notes on the pianos but nothing comes out. If I had a piano in my house now, it would just collect dust. I don't know if I'd have the patience."

David only shakes his head knowingly.

"VICTORY!" YELLS TOM.

"We got it?" says David, peering down along the length of the piano to see that it has now cleared the top step. He heaves a massive sigh. Forty minutes have elapsed since they arrived at the row house. Amazingly, not one foul word has escaped any lips. No swearing, no cursing, no complaining.

They easily slide the piano into the front bedroom and within minutes have the lid and legs reattached and the keyboard assembly plugged back into the main case.

"It was about as tight as it gets," says Mr. Mahonske admirably.

"It was pretty tight," says Eddie.

"No doubt," says David. "I knew it would go."

"Most of the time a piano can go anywhere," says Eddie, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with the sleeve of his T-shirt. "I got to go home and take a shower."

Mr. Mahonske, sitting on the piano bench, riffles the keys. He smiles broadly.

"Now I know I can move in."