Almost all 175 pieces of *The Mane Event* are the same size and color

Stave Puzzles Will Drive You Wild

How a tiny manufacturer of wooden jigsaw puzzles created an addiction that high achievers just can't kick

By Devin Leonard Photograph by Eric Helgas

February 17, 2020

Edited by Chris Rovzar

Businessweek.com

Hal Brierley looked at the 1,185-piece puzzle on the dining room table at his Dallas home with mounting frustration. It had been almost a month since his wife and sister-in-law had given it to him for Christmas to test his puzzling skills, and he was still only a third of the way through.

A designer of customer loyalty programs for companies such as Hilton and Hertz, Brierley craves fiendishly difficult puzzles. He usually has one going on the dining table at his family's second home in Utah, too. "It's probably a bit of an addiction," he admits.

This particularly troublesome brain teaser had been custom-designed by Stave Puzzles Inc., a tiny company that cuts all of its puzzles by hand in a nondescript building in Norwich, Vt., an affluent commuter town across the Connecticut River from Hanover, N.H., home to Dartmouth College. The company jokes that some of its puzzles are conceived by a sadist. Among connoisseurs, it's famous for delighting, infuriating, and fostering a co-dependency with high-achieving customers—names like Gates, Bezos, Bush. Queen Elizabeth II is also a fan, not to mention scores of second-, third-, and fourth-generation heirs to dynastic fortunes.

Pete Furniss, a onetime computer company owner who lives in Georgia, also describes his attachment to Stave puzzles with a whiff of unhealthiness. He got hooked when he stumbled on one in a common area at Triple Creek Ranch, a luxury resort in Montana. "I could have saved a lot of money if I'd never sat down there," he says ruefully. Now one of Stave's biggest customers (he orders about 10 at a time), Furniss says he's sometimes harrowed enough by its puzzles to curse at them. But he kind of likes that.

"There's just something cool about unraveling a puzzle's secrets," says YouTube puzzle expert Chris Ramsay, who has 3.6 million subscribers to his channel, where he broadcasts videos grappling with $3,000 locks and rare Enigma boxes. "The rush of figuring it out yourself only comes with a level of mind-numbing patience, where you start thinking abstractly a little, and it leads you in the right direction. If you're running or owning a business," he continues, "this deconstructing mindset is huge. It's problem solving."

It can be an expensive habit. Staves range from about $300 to $10,000 depending on the number of pieces. A custom-built one can cost even more. One of the company's bestsellers, *The Mane Event*, goes for $1,700. It ranks a 5 out of 5 on the Stave "tormentor" scale because most of its 175 pieces—which add up to make a lion's head if you are ever so clever—are pretty much the same shape and color. Another popular puzzle is *Olivia*, a 215-piece octopus shape that sells for $2,700. It can be assembled 10,000 ways—only one of which is correct. The company even used to offer a bottle of aspirin with it.

Inflicting pain on puzzle addicts wasn't what Steve Richardson, who refers to himself as Stave's "chief tormentor," had in mind when he founded the company in 1974 with Dave Tibbetts. The two, laid off from jobs at a New Hampshire computer company, started making board games and cheap cardboard puzzles. One day a Boston man called to say he'd been buying wooden jigsaws, but his supplier wasn't making them anymore. He was willing to pay $300 apiece (more than $1,600 in today's dollars). "My eyes lit up," Richardson recalls. "I said to Dave, 'If there's an existing customer base of wealthy eccentrics crazy enough to pay that kind of money, maybe we can pick it up.'"

So Richardson got a hold of his father-in-law's scroll saw and taught himself to cut wooden jigsaw pieces. They also bought ads in the *New Yorker*. The first response came from the grandson of the founder of pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly & Co. He was soon spending $50,000 a year on Staves, some of them specially designed for him. Another regular was a woman in New York whose toucan flew around her penthouse, swooping down from time to time to devour puzzle pieces. Rather than cage her pet, she bought the bird its own Stave to nibble on.

Richardson found that the more difficult he made the puzzles, the more compulsive his buyers became. He began to design them without the straight edges that puzzlers tend to look for when they start assembling. He threw in extra pieces that didn't fit to torture them further. People who'd invested thousands of dollars begged for clues; others offered bribes. Some who completed them too easily

The more traditional *Desire*, with an irregular edge, starts at about $900; familiar shapes and words are hidden among the pieces

PROBLEM SOLVERS, UNITE!

Test your puzzling skills in real life with one of these group activities

The Fun One

There aren't any jigsaw pieces at Compass, a biannual puzzle hunt that grew out of the finance industry's Midnight Madness events in New York. Instead, teams from Wall Street firms solve riddles, decode Enigma machines, and apply Fibonacci sequences over 12 hours. In 2017 it began at Pier 46 and ended at the *Intrepid* battleship; in 2019 it started near the stock exchange and wound up at a bar in Brooklyn. (The prize was a bottle of whiskey.) Fees are $30,000 per team, and all proceeds go to Good Shepherd Services, which works with at-risk youth in the city.

The Ridiculous One

The MIT Mystery Hunt, which begins every year at noon the Friday before Martin Luther King Jr. Day, is one of the world's oldest and most complex puzzle hunts. Held on the university's campus in Cambridge, Mass., it attracts about 120 teams and 2,500 contestants every year. The hunt's distinguishing feature is that teams have to find solutions to all the puzzles in one round to solve a metapuzzle before they can begin the "runaround" phase to find a hidden coin—the nominal prize. The hunts, which have been based on *Alice in Wonderland* and the movie *Inception*, take 48 hours.

The Impossible One

For the past decade, Forrest Fenn's treasure hunt has lured thousands of people to the Rocky Mountains to search for a bronze chest full of gold and artifacts said to be worth about $2 million. The only clues are in a 24-line poem Fenn published in 2010, plus a few hints the eccentric art dealer has given along the way: He hid the chest in the mountains of Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, or Wyoming, at an elevation of 5,000 to 10,200 feet. Despite numerous warnings about the treacherous terrain, people continue looking for the loot. At least four have died.

called to complain they hadn't gotten their money's worth.

The company broadened its puzzle-junkie base by partnering with five-star resorts, starting with nearby Twin Farms, where each room has Stave puzzles to entertain snowbound guests. On the night I stayed, I failed to complete the 25-piece puzzle in my room that visitors can take home. (My daughter later managed it in about 10 minutes.)

In 2016, Richardson sold the company to two longtime employees, Paula Tardie and Jennifer Lennox, but he's still designing puzzles, including one for Stave's 45th anniversary party this July. It has three correct outcomes in three different shapes, and anyone who completes it will receive a cash prize.

After recovering from another hectic Christmas season, Tardie, who handles the marketing side, and Lennox, responsible for production, give me a tour of the headquarters. They take me into the cutting room where 13 of their 25 employees, several with Band-Aids on their fingers, are hunched over saws. The cutters get a big board with the picture on it, and then each one is hand-cut so there's some personal style in it. Lennox says some customers are so particular, they want all their puzzles cut by the same person. "It's really weird," she says.

Around the corner, there's a wall of pictures and letters from some of Stave's best-known customers, where a photo of Bill and Melinda Gates is enshrined. "They like difficulty," Lennox says. Tardie agrees, saying the couple had fun with the $5,400 *Pentagon*, a limited edition that included five puzzles and a spy thriller with clues on how to complete it. There's also a picture of Jeff Bezos and his family. "Actually, Jeff's ex-wife, she's the puzzler," Tardie says. The late Barbara Bush, a longtime customer, used to say the best time for learning what was going on with her family was when she was sitting at the puzzle table with her children and grandchildren.

From there, Tardie and Lennox take me to a room down the hall to talk about the puzzle Brierley has on his dining room table. They show me a picture on a computer screen and explain how they worked with his wife and sister-in-law to make it. It's based on safari trips they took, and about a third is made up of their photos from the journeys. The rest of the pieces are almost all blue. Tardie has been keeping track of his progress—or lack thereof—via email updates from his wife. "He's crazy," Tardie says, laughing. "This is probably the most difficult puzzle we've ever made for him."

Back in Dallas, Brierley's mind veers toward conspiracy. His sister-in-law, he says, is punishing him for finishing an earlier one that displayed Buckingham Palace in a mere three hours. "Next Christmas, I keep telling them, give the money to charity. Do something different!" But he isn't quite ready to go cold turkey: "Let's just say I'm not a recovering Stave customer—yet." B