



Escape Boom

Terps Bring Escape Room Craze to Baltimore

I'M THE OWNER OF A NEW YACHT, AND I've just been kidnapped by a psychotic lighthouse keeper named Captain White. He's planning on torturing me, but—lucky me!—he left his tools at home. I have 45 minutes to find a way out of the lighthouse before he returns with his implements.

Okay, fine. There's no lighthouse keeper. In fact, I've never been inside a lighthouse. (Also, I can't afford a yacht.) But this is the story I'm told before my two companions and I are locked inside a lighthouse-themed room and given 45 minutes to get out.

We're at Escape 45, an escape room in downtown Baltimore started last year by three UMD students and a Johns Hopkins alum. The concept of an escape room started in Asia and soon spread to Europe and North America. Groups of up to eight people are locked inside a room and can leave only if they solve an interwoven set of puzzles and riddles. (The situation isn't dire—if the group remains trapped, an employee will unlock the door.)

The idea for Escape 45 came to biology major Dylan Kapoor '17, mechanical engineering majors and brothers Asad '17 and Fahed '18 Masood, and their partner, longtime friend Ashraf Afzal, in 2015, inspired by a friend in California who had recently opened an escape room. "We started doing research and learning about it, and we thought, 'Hey, we could start this up on our own,'" says Asad Mahood.

But before they could start locking people up, they had to figure out the riddles each room would contain.

"All four of us would be in Glenn L. Martin Hall, just hashing out ideas on the whiteboard and writing out the puzzles," says Asad Masood.

Those puzzles eventually turned into the three rooms of Escape 45. (In addition to the lighthouse room, there's one with a jewel heist theme and another made to look like a haunted cabin.) What makes their escape room unique, the owners say, is a focus on automation powered by microprocessors called Arduinos. "It's a combination of some coding, some parallel circuits and sensors," says Kapoor.

Trapped in the lighthouse room, my friends and I don't know anything about Arduinos, but we do figure out where to place two magnets on a large wall map, causing a locked door across the room to pop open. This is progress, and we celebrate accordingly.

We're far from the only group at Escape 45 today—indeed, the owners say traffic has been heavy since it opened in February 2016.

"Over winter break, we were there until 4 a.m. almost every day," says Kapoor. "I was working 40 hours a week at my other job and I'd go there every day after work, so I was sleeping just a couple hours a day, but I was having so much fun."

Hoping to sleep more regularly, the foursome hired a crew of employees and is navigating the challenges of running a business while in school full-time. "The benefit of having many partners is that the burden is alleviated from all of us," says Asad Masood.

Having some more partners might have helped us in the lighthouse. I'll just say this: We didn't escape. Kapoor and the Masoods assure me that they've only seen a handful of such small groups make it out of the room. Still, we politely declined posing for a photo to hang in their hall of shame.—SL 

