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Cracked It! Escape Games to open in Jacksonville

The real-life escape experience locks players inside a themed room as they work as a team to solve a series of puzzles, riddles and hints in order to escape within the 60-minute time limit

One room, a handful of clues and 60 minutes: It's a real life Clue game and you have to solve the puzzle in order to escape.

Jacksonville's newest family-friendly business, Cracked It! Escape Games, opens Jan. 7. It's a family-owned business: Marine veterans Brian and Margaret Vinciguerra and their two daughters, Alyson, 18, and Candace, 23, operate the site located at 559 Freedom Way near Midway Park. Brian, a scenario designer for tactical training support at Camp Lejeune, said he and his family have lived in Jacksonville for over 25 years and realized there wasn't much in the way of family fun.

"We want to make Jacksonville a destination," Margaret said.

The Vinciguerra family has participated in numerous other escape rooms and said they fell in love with it.

"Think of SAW, without the blood," Brian said to describe escape rooms.

With Cracked It!, they wanted to focus on two principles: Family fun for ages 10 to 80 and a building that was completely wheelchair accessible. As a wounded veteran himself, Brian wanted to ensure everyone, especially Marines, could play.

The first room, which was just created in November, is called Antiquities, Investigations and Recovery (A.I.R.) In Search of: Episode 1. "In this adventure players are members of a secret society that recovers powerful artifacts and returns them to their rightful historical location," Brian said in a press release.

Outside knowledge is not required, Brian said. Everything players need to escape will be inside that room.

Before the game begins, the Vinciguerra family will debrief and explain the room. Players will then be locked in a newly-painted navy and taupe room with a couple of aged photos hanging on the wall. On one side is a built-in bookshelf, an antique chair, a fireplace and a desk. On the other stands a second shelf and small table. Around the room are numerous foreign trinkets, books and magazines.

"There are clues hidden everywhere," Brian said with a smile. "You can't go into someone's home and look through drawers, but you can here."

Many places have about a 25-percent success rate, Brian said. "Our puzzles are difficult enough to frustrate you," but they're hoping for more like a 40-percent success rate. They wanted the players to feel rewarded and want to play again.

"It's just something fun, interactive," Margaret said. "People of all ages can take part in it."

Three hints will be included if parties get stumped, and the room is monitored at all times in case someone needs to leave for any reason. Brian said this was to help with Marines dealing with PTSD or if someone needs a bathroom break. The clock will keep ticking, though.

After the game, the Vinciguerra family will take a photo of the group in front of a Cracked It! sign. Alyson created signs for players to hold up for the photos, including "The Riddler," "Too Easy" and "The Organizer." Brian said they'll post the photos on the Cracked It! Facebook page.

On opening day, the one room will be ready; but by June, they plan to have three escape rooms and a party room for birthdays ready to go. One of the new rooms will be small enough for two players to have a date night. The A.I.R. room will host four to eight people, and the third room will be the largest and host up to 12.

All booking is done online, either through the Cracked It-Escape Games Facebook page or at crackeditnc.com. The first 100 people to book a game in January can "like" the Facebook page and receive 25-percent off their first game. Doors are open from noon to 9 p.m. Thursday through Monday. Tickets are \$25 each.

"You don't realize until you get in it how much fun it is," Brian said.



Margaret Vinciguerra, Brian Vinciguerra, and daughter Alyson Vinciguerra are opening their new family owned and operated business Cracked It! Escape Games in Jacksonville. The real-life escape experience locks players inside a themed room for 60 minute as they work as a team to solve a series of puzzles, riddles and hints in order to escape within the time limit. To find out more, visit crackeditnc.com. Photo by Elizabeth Horn / The Daily News

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