

How I ... Lock folks up in a room for their fun

Ginger Flesher-Sonnier, owner, Escape Room Live LLP Executive Profile

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Joanne S. Lawton

Ginger Flesher-Sonnier, a puzzle nut at heart, is already redoing escape rooms she opened in D.C., while planning to offer Sherlock- and Wizard-themed escape rooms in Alexandria this spring.



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With a bachelor's in math and master's in educational psychology, it's no wonder [Ginger Flesher-Sonnier](#) loves a good brainteaser. A math teacher and department chair for two decades, she followed her husband's job here two years ago, dabbling in real estate and interior design since. Until a European stay introduced her to the world of escape room games — a world she brought to D.C. in October and plans to expand to Old Town Alexandria this spring.

How did you first hear about the concept of these escape rooms? I had gone to Europe for three months for my husband's job. I never heard about it before June. When we started to do research on cities we were visiting, every single city had things like that come up — escape rooms — at the top of the list for attractions. So we decided to try a few out. We looked to see if there were any in D.C. and there were not, so we kind of naturally progressed from there into "Wow, wouldn't this be fun?"

You can enjoy them as participants. Why start your own business in them? I just felt like it would really be a great thing. I haven't taught in about two years, so I've been creatively bored. I just want it to be successful and a great creative outlet for myself to design and create the puzzles. There are a few in the United States, and we looked at some of those. We just decided to do it ourselves. We thought we would do a better job.

Why is that? We calculated all the expenses. And I have some interior design talent and art talent in addition to math. I thought we could do the whole package and present it better and provide a better experience for the customer.

Why did you stop teaching math? We moved to this area for my husband's job. I was department chair in Charleston. I didn't need to work at the time, and I thought it was time to do an early retirement.

You had a real estate business as well in between? I had done real estate, yes. My license isn't active. I had gotten my license a year and a half ago. The competition in this area is just insane. It was not something I enjoyed. I made my license inactive.

So when you did these escape rooms in Europe, what struck you the most about it? I think it's the fact that you had to solve puzzles and riddles to get out of the room. That's what drew me to do the first one. I'm always looking for something different to do. I had seen an escape room app on our iPhone or iPad, but this was so much more fun. I fell in love with them.

Why did you think it would work in D.C.? Because of the atmosphere, the intelligence. People here are very creative and they want to use their brain. And this is less physical than it seems, it's very cerebral, so D.C. is the perfect place.

Why the name? So we could expand to other cities and adapt the name. Even if we do open a new one, which should be within six months, it would be in this area. My daughter lives up in Providence, and she'd like to do one in Boston.

What was your first step in making this business? While we were still in Europe, I started to plan a game design, because it's about 30 clues and they all need to link together somehow. And also researching a business license and forming an LLC. In the fall, when we got back, I started to look at locations and shop for props and things that we could use in the rooms as the clues. That was the best part. Then it was taking an office space and trying to create some atmosphere with music and design and creating a game.

Who was your first customer? Our first customers are really good friends now, and I have two working for me. They came in, and it was my husband and I there, and they did the room, and I hadn't anticipated how long it would take to reset for the next customers. It takes a full 10 minutes to reset because there are so many clues and locks and things. And they helped me reset the room for the next customers. And they were hysterical — they had so many ideas. We actually adopted a lot of those ideas.

How was the overall response? As soon as we opened, I would say within a week or two, we realized we wanted to open the additional room — we had two extra rooms in the space that we eventually planned to open — and started immediately on the second room. And then we realized the lobby wasn't big enough to hold everybody. So we took the third room that was available and made it an extra waiting area.

That happened fast with the expansion: I just went crazy seven days a week. It was fun but exhausting. I knew that there were other people in the area thinking of doing the same thing. When I went to Realtors, they said, "Wait a second, I already spoke to you." And I was like, "No, you didn't." I knew I had to move quickly.

Who is your competition here? There's one in Orlando that says "coming soon to Washington D.C." And then I was also approached by some investors who said they were planning to open one, but I don't know exactly where.

How did you raise the money for startup funds? Through savings we had in pocket.

How did you find the Glover Park location? That was the most difficult part. I would say I physically went to visit 30 places, and a lot of people didn't want to lease to us because it was such a

new concept. They had no idea what we were talking about even though I had a plan and presentation written up. They didn't want to touch it. I found a woman who was mentally flexible and decided to give it a shot. But otherwise, especially with me not having much of a business background, they didn't want to take the risk.

What kind of space were you looking for? I wanted at least two rooms we could make escape rooms with different themes and a nice waiting area. But I also wanted it to be a neighborhood where I wouldn't be afraid to walk at night. Most of our activities are at nights and weekends. Many of the places we looked at, I was afraid to go to in the daytime.

How did you come up with the setup? I just thought of things I found interesting. I got some ideas from the places we visited. Mostly they relied on giving you hints for you to escape. But I wanted to make it so people could escape without getting hints. I thought of things that were logical and sequential and lead one to another and riddles that were solvable in a short amount of time — and still challenging.

How do you come up with those? Everywhere I look now, I see a potential clue or lockbox or somewhere or something to use creatively. I already have a stash of things in my basement that are waiting for a new room. I don't think it will be an issue. Over the years, being a Mathletes coach for 15 years, I have a stash of riddles and things I'd love to use. Brainteasers and problems.

So you must have some unusual props. I'm not sure I'm going to use everything that I buy. So I save it all up and return it all at once. It took me a half-hour to return everything at Home Goods once and the lady looked at me like I was insane. I went to CVS and bought three different locks and went to the checkout and had bizarre things, like tape and locks and lotion, and it was just a weird combination. The guy was looking at me like, "What the heck."

What changes do you expect to make to the concept? We are constantly adapting the rooms and the clues, I would say — weekly just to tweak them. We would also like to take another entire set of clues and put them in a room and be able to have people come back and redo the same room, and follow a different trail or do the "red clues." We actually have a lot of repeat customers, and they do the second room or they bring their friends and family back. We are going to mix it up and do different riddles and make it so it's a whole new experience.

There's a lot going on here in terms of nightlife and activities — how did you go about starting to market this? Mostly we do it with social media and word of mouth. That's the only advertising we've done so far, really. Facebook. So far it's been very successful, so we can't complain.

Some people talk about your price being high, what do you say to that? We are always running discounts and incentives. We have a LivingSocial deal that sold out almost in one day. If you reserve the entire room, you get a 20% discount. I would just say keep your eyes open and consider perhaps bringing more people so you get the 20 percent discount. Not many people pay full price. And that's actually the going rate everywhere in New York, Orlando, Nashville.

What do you see as your biggest challenges? Competition that comes in. That will be the most difficult. So expanding, I don't think, is going to be that difficult. We would like to get a place that has a large central waiting area and five to seven rooms so that people could do more than one room in a night. I would like to have some alcohol available and have it be a really cool place to hang out with board games and puzzles in the waiting area. Those are things we're all looking into right now.

What's next for you? First, another location locally. We are in the process of lease negotiation in Old Town Alexandria on King Street. And then taking it nationwide, making it something that can be reproduced in tourist areas. It should be much easier this time to negotiate a lease.

What's your timeline to open another location here? Hopefully within the next three to four months. Just one more locally and then nationally, 10 to 30.

You have a system set up to franchise? We have been writing up documents. The initial outlay for somebody would probably be \$100,000 and that would include a \$30,000 franchise fee. And then we would get a percentage of royalties, and we would help with design, the website, etc. But we're working on that.

The basics

- **Company:** Escape Room Live LLC
- **What it does:** Offers escape room games for patrons in 45-minute windows
- **Leadership:** [Ginger Flesher-Sonnier](#), owner
- **Location:** Glover Park; business based in Loudoun County
- **Customers:** 953 in December
- **Website:** www.escaperoomlive.com

Vandana Sinha oversees print edition.

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