

SMASHIN'

Desiree Miller and her husband, Matt, started planning in 2019 to open their own entertainment business, such as an axe-throwing venue, but they weren't sure what type until they saw a "smash room" featured on a therapy TV show, which led to their "aha" moment. Event businesses like escape rooms were starting to catch on in their area, but a smash room was different from anything available nearby.

"I was like, how awesome would that be if there was someplace around here where you could take your frustrations out in a safe manner, and you don't have to worry about people get-

ting hurt or going to jail?" the Lincoln, NE Branch 8 member said.

To prepare, they went to the closest existing smash room in Omaha, about 60 miles away, to see how it was set up and how things were run.

"Based off of that and our research of other smash places around the country, we just kind of followed suit, and it became our own entity," Miller said. They rented a space and applied with the city of Lincoln to start a business. "We got approved for everything, and here we are, two and a half years later, with an ever-thriving business."

Smashin' It 402 opened in July 2020, during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of potential lockdowns, the Millers were proactive and contacted the health department, explaining that they owned an amusement business, and "they gave us the things that we needed to do in order to stay open," Miller said. Because the business operates on a reservation system, she added, they were able to keep people separated.

"It was one of the few places that people could come to for entertainment during that time where they didn't have to worry about being within the [required] 6 feet of other people," she added, "so it was a real individualized experience for our customers."

The concept is simple: People ages 8 and up book a slot and pay online at its website, smashinit402.com (though for ages 8-18, a parent/guardian signature is required and they must be present). It costs \$35 for a small-group smash for up to three people for a 20-minute session on up to \$180 for a large smash of up to six people, which includes extra items and a half-hour





session. There are also party packages for eight-plus people.

Once the person or group arrives, they are brought to a smash room.

Participants are given a milk crate full of breakable glass items to smash during their allotted time frame and a whole bunch of bigger items, as well as some electronics like speakers or computer screens, Miller said, adding that keyboards are a favorite, as well as printers for fans of the 1999 movie about workplace frustrations, “Office Space.” Customers use baseball bats or hammers or other tools to do the smashing.

“They go in for about 20 minutes or so and destroy everything as much as they possibly can within that time,” the carrier explained. “When they’re all done, they come out a hot, sweaty mess, and hopefully they feel better about whatever reason it was that brought them in. We try to make anger management as fun as possible and help you with all your frustration needs.”

Smashers are asked to sign a waiver prior to participating, and are provided with lab coats, goggles or face shields, and gloves for their safety—as well as pants or overshoes in the summer if necessary.

“We don’t just go sending people in there willy-nilly,” Miller said. “We do provide them with some sort of protective gear, because, of course, there’s flying glass, some plastic and sometimes metal and stuff.”

She added: “We try to protect people as much as possible,” although on occasion people do come out with nicks on their hands, face or legs, for which the Millers provide first-aid supplies, such as Band-Aids.

Miller, who has delivered mail since 2014, makes the business work for her



Desiree Miller

around her postal schedule. She and Matt both head to Smashin’ It 402 just after their day jobs, and they accept the first reservations at 6 p.m. each evening Wednesday through Friday, and starting at noon on Saturday, its busiest day. The last smash session each night is 10 p.m.

For now, it is solely the two of them as employees, along with their god-daughter, who helps on Fridays and Saturdays when she’s not in school.

They source items to smash from a variety of places, such as breakable items from local thrift stores that haven’t been selling. The state and public school systems have auctions

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for things that they can't use anymore. Local technology companies ALLO and Nelnet provide unwanted electronics. There are also Facebook free pages where the Millers can express interest in posted items that they then can pick up, and they also put out word that they accept donations for unwanted stuff. Participants can increase the amount of items to smash during their bookings by bringing their own things into the facility at no extra charge.

And, of course, being a letter carrier means that Miller has eyes and ears on the street. "I have a bunch of people at my station that find stuff just sitting on the side of the road, and they'll send me pictures, and I'll go pick it up after I get off of work," she said.

They keep all these items in a large storage room, attached to the main floor of the facility, from which they can wheel carts in and out.

After the smashers come through, the Millers take 15 to 30 minutes to clean up and restage, assessing the leftover materials and debris. They tear the electronics apart, separating metals from plastics and so on for recycling purposes. The metal goes to a recycler who sometimes gives them various items that he doesn't need anymore, or that are broken and can't be used.

"We try to recycle as much as we possibly can," Miller said. "Otherwise it just goes back into the trash can, but at least it's in a million little pieces."

Miller says the feedback she's received has been nothing but positive, and they've seen a lot of repeat customers, such as one group of buddies who come in every other week.

"It's really rewarding when you get to see the people that come in who have heard from various other people

who have already been in there, just because they were looking for something to try to help their friends with whatever frustrations it is that they have," Miller said.

She added: "We've had quite a few people come in who have had deceased loved ones, and they've been brought in to help them out—and they will turn around and like it so much that they'll bring their children in, and then those children will bring their friends in. So word of mouth has been really, really good for us."

They've done only a little bit of advertising—TV and radio commercials when they first opened, and some Facebook and Instagram ads. "My husband just recently got his truck wrapped with our logo, and that's probably been our biggest marketing pull-in," Miller said. "People [are] seeing that and being like, 'Oh my gosh, I didn't realize we had one of those here' and then they look us up."

While they don't have a lot of individual smashers, the carrier mentioned one cool experience recently where a woman came in after being gifted a session by her husband who was in California for work. She was able to set up her phone using a phone holder in the room and FaceTime him while she smashed.

The smash-room concept has proven popular not only with those needing an outlet to vent pent-up frustrations, but also for bigger team-building events and fundraisers. Smashin' It is also currently in talks with a local college sorority for a rush week event. And the couple promotes the public good when they can.

"Desiree and her husband worked with our branch to hold a fundraiser to benefit MDA" in September, Lincoln



Smashin' It 402 gets lots of groups doing team-building activities.

Branch 8 President **Trey Jensen** said. “It was their first [huge] group event and a fun experience for our members.”

Miller said it was nice to do an event with NALC and be able to give back to the Muscular Dystrophy Association, adding that they’d like to do it again if possible. She added that her co-workers have been really supportive of her business, whether through encouraging comments, spreading the word or other ways.

For now, Miller said they are happy going in the direction that Smashin’ It 402 has been taking them, though they have plenty of ideas.

“We are hoping that eventually we can open up to a bigger facility to potentially add a couple more smash rooms to make it a little more seamless,” she said, noting that they don’t currently accept walk-ins, but that this is an option they’d like to get to.

They also foresee their future entertainment funplex having additional activities like Nerf gun wars, a splatter room with paint where people can decorate their own canvases, and a wet room where participants can do seasonal

smashes like watermelons or pumpkins.

“We’re trying to think of out-of-the-box ideas for children and high school kids to do,” Miller said, adding that due to the pandemic, “everything just seems to be closing down anymore. And everything is just the same—there’s nothing tantalizing.”

There also are talks about opening other locations—in bigger towns in Nebraska like Kearney and Grand Island, or potentially opening in Colorado Springs, CO, which is 550 miles away but where they have a contact who could provide inventory.

Miller loves her business for dual reasons. “One, because it’s mine,” she says, “and two, because I very much enjoy seeing people’s reactions when they come out of the rooms.

“Just seeing the help that it gives people is something that really drives me to want to keep going and seeing how far we can get,” she added. “That’s my main push, the relief I see on my customers’ faces. I hope that when people come that it fulfills them in one way, shape or form.” **PR**