

# THE AMAZING MASOOD FAMILY



**A former LABB family transforms a 19th century barn in Lexington Center for the benefit of all.**

By Jeri Zeder

Superheroes teach life lessons. From Spider-Man, we learn: With great power comes great responsibility. From the Masood family, we learn: With deep gratitude comes extraordinary generosity.

The Masoods—father Sohail, mother Mona, sister Laila, and son Omar—are the founders and operators of Omar's World of Comics & Hobbies, a bright, fun Lexington Center establishment intentionally designed to welcome and support the young and young-at-heart, with and without disabilities. Since 2018, Omar's World has been a destination for comic book aficionados, board-gamers, card-gamers, and tournaments. Its not-so-secret superpower is its partnership with LABB, the Lexington, Arlington, Burlington, Bedford, and Belmont special-education collaborative housed at Lexington High School.

The big news is that, this summer, Omar's World is moving from its present location at 30 Waltham Street to sensational new digs at 20 Waltham Street (site of the former Vine Brook Tavern). The new store will transform a historic old barn into a sparkling spot for shopping, gaming, learning, and just being with friends.

Sohail Masood,  
Omar Masood, and  
Mona Masood.

"This is a place where people come in and they don't have to worry about anything. They can even bring in their pets if they want," says Sohail Masood, who lives in Weston. "It's a happy place and I love it. This is a no-judgment zone."

Like every respectable super-legend, Omar's World has a compelling origin story. In 2018, Sohail and Mona were facing what's known by parents of children with special needs as "the cliff." Omar, who has Down syndrome, was about to turn twenty-two, which meant that he was aging out of LABB, his beloved school. Omar would no longer have access to the structured, meaningful, enriching community that had done so much for him and his family. Nothing comparable existed to replace it. What would Omar do now?

Knowing their son's fascination with comic books, especially the Marvel Universe, Sohail and Mona got the idea of opening a comic book and gaming store, where Omar could come to work every day, where people of all ages and abilities would be welcome to browse and hang out, and—centrally—where opportunities for internships and employment for people with special needs from LABB and from the Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress would be baked into the store's core mission. Omar's World is a labor of love. While it is legally a limited liability company, it does not turn a profit, though for various reasons the Masoods decided against forming it as a charitable organization.

"In our hearts, we're doing it for charity and the welfare of our kid and the other kids who have disabilities and have no place else to find a job or go hang out," says Sohail.

Sohail holds a Doctor of Pharmacy degree from the University of Southern California, and is the founder and CEO of Lexington-based KabaFusion, which provides infusion medications to patients receiving care at home. He purchased 20 Waltham Street in June of last year. Dating from the 1870s, it was originally a barn of

heavy timber resting on fieldstone, with a cupola and weathervane, and is what remains of the once Mass. Ave.-facing homestead of Dr. Howland Holmes. "It sheltered hay, cows, and the horse and carriage that the distinguished physician used when he made house calls," wrote Alice Hinkle, author of the children's book Prince Estabrook, Slave and Soldier, in a 1982 article for the Lexington Minuteman. From the mid-1920s to the late 1930s, the barn was a United States Post Office. In later iterations, it was a clothing store, a gourmet market, and then a succession of restaurants.

The new building will increase the size of Omar's World from around 1,200 to around 6,200 square feet. The first floor will offer expanded retail space and include a kitchen. On the second floor, there will be a permanent set-up for table-top games and tournaments, and, in the back, space dedicated to virtual-reality gaming, a specialty of Omar's sister Laila, who is an undergraduate at Northeastern University. In the basement will be offices for Omar and the store manager.

All this will allow Omar's World to increase the number of student

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David Spinale, Chief Strategy Officer, Haynes Group

interns working there from the LABBB transition program from three to at least five, and allow for a couple of more students to learn cooking skills in the kitchen. The store's location is ideal because LABBB students frequently come to Lexington Center during their school day and stop at Omar's World

on the way to lunch. With the larger space, more students can come by and shop and see their classmates working. "The main reason that we want to be in this newer location is to have additional jobs and additional work for folks from LABBB, and be able to hire more people who graduated from the LABBB program and are looking for jobs," says store manager Tyler Christopher.

Christopher ensures that the link between LABBB and the store is smooth and productive. "Tyler works with me closely to review student plans and help with programming, and he works directly with the students while they are in the store," says LABBB transition instructor Karen Scopetski. "Whenever I have an idea, he listens, offers his expertise and ideas, and is open to anything I want to do. He is the key person planning and authorizing everything to do with the LABBB internship."

Scopetski sees enormous potential for her students in the new location. "We'll have a lot more products. That will allow for more of everything to do with the products—sales, customer service, pricing, and keeping track of the inventory," she



Connor Byrnes is one of the LABBB students working at Omar's.

says. The added space for community gatherings will increase opportunities for social coaching. "There's so much learning just in playing a game—social turn-taking, leading a game, just being able to understand the concept of a game," she says. Because the default answer to nearly every question at Omar's World is "yes," Scopetski is brainstorming new ideas like crazy. A deck of cards to teach students about various jobs and professions? No problem! Michael Epstein, the store's event coordinator and local board game designer, is going to turn Scopetski's cards into a real deck. And that office space in the basement—maybe they could have students do mock job interviews down there!

Favorite traditions from the old store will carry over into the new. "I am Professor of Comics," Omar says. "That's my title." He'll continue in these roles after the move, fulfilling his responsibilities of pricing products, taking inventory, and

checking merchandise deliveries. He'll also stick with his practice of bestowing superhero names on everyone, employees and customers alike. The coronavirus pandemic has, of course, disrupted store hours, but when it is safe, the plans are to be open seven days a week from around noon and into the evening.

"LABBB's vision and philosophy is for its students to be in the community, be part of the community, showing how its students can be productive," says LABBB Executive Director Patric Barbieri. "Having these social and work opportunities really grow our mission, and the Masoods recognize that. They're offering something wonderful to the world, what could be for students with special needs. It gives hope to a lot of parents."

Converting the old barn for its new use involves preserving its history,

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making it accessible, and bringing it up to code. Adding an elevator was a key element for accessibility, and Lexington's Historic Districts Commission needed to be satisfied that the elevator's penthouse structure didn't block the exterior view of the historic cupola.

"Through the HDC approval process, I think we gained a better outcome, respecting the historic nature of the building itself and also creating welcoming space for all people of all abilities," says Andrew LaFosse, project manager with the Boston architectural firm Studio Troika.

"We're really fortunate to be able to work on a project like this," says Lexington resident Michael Samra, a partner at Studio Troika. "It helps a lot of people within our community, and that's really the primary goal here."

A variance for the back stairway was unanimously granted by Lexington's Commission on Disability. "We were very pleased to be able to support somebody that's working so hard for people with disabilities," says Commission Chair Victoria Buckley.

Leading the team that's bringing the plans to fruition is David Spinale, chief strategy officer at the Haynes Group, a commercial construction company in West Bridgewater, Mass. "It's amazing to consider the contrast between the building's historic look and its imminent use," Spinale says. "What was once an early-1900s post office is now to be home to comic book heroes and pizza and



burgers and virtual-reality games, all serving as a special educational resource for area kids."

"To be associated with Omar's World and getting to know Omar and the Masood family and being able to help them channel all that passion and goodness to build something that will lift the community and touch so many lives through the LABBB Collaborative every day for years to come is something that we'll all be proud of for the rest of

Above: On the second floor, there will be a permanent set-up for table-top games and tournaments, and, in the back, space dedicated to virtual-reality gaming.

our lives," Spinale says. "It's a beautiful project."

Indeed. A beautiful project from people with beautiful hearts.