

Addicted to the game. **In Life**

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## Over all obstacles



Art Vassy/Daily Southtown

Donatas Masionis rides an exercise bike at his home in Hickory Hills. Masionis attends Moraine Valley Community College with the help of a scholarship.

## Student pursues dream after devastating crash

Donatas Masionis, of Hickory Hills, lost control of his car on Archer Avenue on a snowy night in 2005. The accident left him paralyzed, with brain and spinal cord injuries.

Now 21, the Lithuanian immigrant is studying computers

at Moraine Valley Community College.

"Time came for me to show what I can do and find my place in this world," Masionis said.

Vickie Snow has more on Masionis' story. **A3**

## First flood, then fire

A blaze swept through a New Lenox home Monday, leaving ashes and debris piled in the backyard.

It was the second time the Doolin family's house had been severely damaged in the past several weeks — last month's storms flooded the basement.

"It's gone. Everything's gone," Rainie Doolin said.

Story on **A4**

## Time of need

Friends plan a fundraiser to help pay a New Lenox family's medical insurance. Jim Haas died earlier this year, and his daughter, an Illinois State sophomore, is being treated for a brain tumor. **A3**

## For emergencies — and a lot more

Bremen Community High School District 228 is setting up a new, improved system to communicate with parents. **A7**

## Reading room

Work on the first phase of the Green Hills Public Library expansion is nearly complete. **A7**

### ON THE JOB

Richards High football coach Gary Korhonen poised to set an Illinois record.

Your Business



## DEFENDING CHAMP

Trevor Immelman wants a repeat at Cog Hill — even if the Western Open has a new name.



Cubs can't keep up with Dodgers.

In Sports

# Technology, tenacity and no tears

## Hickory Hills man wins scholarship after brutal crash

By Vickie Snow  
Staff writer

Donatas Masionis recently started his third semester at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills.

Like many students, he's doing so with the help of a small scholarship.

But unlike most of his peers, Masionis gets around campus in a wheelchair after surviving a car crash, coma and brain and spinal cord injuries — and after coming to the states at age 12 speaking only Lithuanian and some French.

"I'm trying to live the life I had before," Donatas recently said in the living room of the spotless Hickory Hills tri-level home he shares with his parents and grandfather. "It's just a little different."

At 21 years old, his legs are paralyzed, and he has problems controlling his bladder.

His parents — Regina Masionis, who has a nursing assistant certificate from Moraine Valley, and Alvydas Masionis, who speaks little English and works evenings and weekends for Panera Bread Co. — set the alarm clock for 3 a.m. every night to reposition Donatas to alleviate pain and muscle spasms.

Because he can't sit in a wheelchair for more than four hours at a time, Donatas only can enroll in two classes per semester.

He attends class three times a week. The computer technician certificate he's studying for takes 20 credit hours.

Finishing college will take a while, but Donatas is determined to do so and get a job.

"This is the immigrant dream," said Dr. Douglas Koltun, who oversaw Donatas' recovery as chief of pediatric rehabilitation at Advocate Hope Children's Hospital. "One of the reasons people move here is for their



Donatas Masionis sits with his mother, Regina, and father, Alvydas, in their Hickory Hills home. The three work together to help Donatas overcome a life-altering crash.

kids, to give them a better life."

Just seven years after immigrating from Lithuania, the Masionis family's dreams nearly died. A few months shy of graduating from Argo Community High School in Summit, Donatas left a friend's house after watching movies and was driving home along the dark, windy stretch of Archer Avenue and Route 83 on Feb. 11, 2005.

It was snowing — a wet, heavy snow — and he lost control of his car, hitting the back bumper of another vehicle, veering off the road and crashing into trees.

That's about all Donatas remembers about the single night that's changed his life but not his goals.

"I woke up in the hospital," he said.

"After seven days and nights in a coma," his mother added,

quickly wiping a tear from her cheek. "I made pictures for him. He still cannot look at them."

Donatas spent two weeks on a ventilator in the intensive care unit at Advocate Hospital in Oak Lawn. He had bleeding on the brain, broken vertebrae, a collapsed lung and fractured ribs. He required a feeding tube for four months.

He fought meningitis, other infections and high fevers. He underwent surgery to implant an intracranial monitor to measure pressure on the brain and drain excess fluid.

"Initially, his prognosis was quite guarded," Dr. Koltun said. "At first, his ability to understand what was going on was affected, his sense of time and reasoning."

Donatas had trouble telling friends apart and experienced other memory blocks typical of

a brain injury.

"He was like a baby," Regina Masionis said.

"With brain trauma, people often have ongoing problems," Dr. Koltun said. "He's exceeded expectations."

After five months in the hospital, Donatas went home, where the dining room, on the ground level, was transformed into his bedroom. Teachers delivered homework three times a week.

Although side effects from medication made reading a challenge, Donatas earned his high school diploma in February 2006.

"That's where he really shines," Dr. Koltun said. "With both problems, the brain injury and paraplegia, he's not only been able to function, but function at a high level. He's strongly motivated to get his (college)

degree. He's quite inspirational in overcoming these horrendous obstacles."

Despite everything he's been through, Donatas focuses on the positives. When he talks about adapting to a wheelchair, Donatas speaks matter-of-factly.

"It was different, but I got used to it," he said. "I try to keep busy."

Donatas helps friends and family send letters via e-mail to loved ones in Lithuania. He uses handheld weights and a personalized bicycle, sitting in his wheelchair with his feet strapped to pedals and moving his arms to exercise his legs.

He also enjoys watching Russian movies with his grandfather, who doesn't share his love of computers.

"My first computer was very slow," Donatas said. "I took it apart and made it faster."

**"Doctors did a great job fighting for my life. Time came for me to show what I can do and find my place in this world."**

**DONATAS MASIONIS, computer whiz who battled back from extensive injuries, in his scholarship application**

As a small child, Donatas was fond of tinkering with his toys.

"He always wanted to look inside," Regina Masionis said with a laugh.

Now Donatas is on his way to turning that fascination with how computers work into employment.

He was chosen from nearly 40 applicants to receive a \$1,500 scholarship from Aabcor Inc., which has offices in Chicago and Darien and provides case management services for more than 1,400 people with brain injuries and their families.

"His personal statement was very powerful," Aabcor president Ahmed Basith said. "His story is very compelling."

It's the first time Aabcor has provided scholarships. Basith said he hopes to make it an annual tradition.

"Young people need educational support to function," he said. "With a brain injury, without education, it's very hard."

Donatas and his family, including his sister Judita, of Palos Hills, are proud but extremely modest, preferring to praise Aabcor's social workers and the many doctors and nurses at Christ Hospital.

"Doctors did a great job fighting for my life," Donatas wrote in his scholarship application. "Time came for me to show what I can do and find my place in this world."

"Life is very different now," Regina Masionis said. "What do you do? Cry all the time? We can't. No tears."

"No tears," Donatas repeated and smiled.

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