

Video gamers like Martin Omes are givers too

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Martin Omes and his video-gaming friends were tired of hearing the same old knocks against their hobby.

The games were too violent and that only “geeks and nerds” played them, detractors would say.

In 2007, Georgetown resident Omes and his buddies from Michigan who he'd met online wanted to organize a Halo tournament at their high school in Ann Arbor for about 300 players.

A couple of parents complained that the games were “too violent and corrupted the youth,” Omes recalled, so the school superintendent revoked the boys' permit to stage the event.

Ticked off by the snub, the group wanted to show its critics that video gaming could be used for good purposes and decided to rent a community centre to host the tournament called Gamers for Giving, which raised \$5,000 for the local cancer society.

Gamers Outreach was born, and the organization's members have built and donated game systems to hospitals in several U.S. states, along with U.S. military personnel overseas.

This past year, the annual Gamers for Giving event set a goal of raising \$25,000 in the ballroom of Eastern Michigan University and finished up with \$57,000.

Gamers For Giving 2016 just released tickets for the event this year, to be held March 12-13 at EMU's Convocation Centre, where 2,000 gamers are expected to take part and the goal is to raise \$100,000.

“I feel like the reputation is starting to change with the rise of e-sports and million-dollar tournaments,” said Omes, who last year graduated from Mount Allison University in New Brunswick with a degree in environmental studies.

“There was always the stereotype, ‘Oh, you

play video games so you must not have friends or a real life.’ The hardest part is the media always tries to find that outlier. There's always that one kid they always try to blame on video games and it's hard to remove it when everything gets pointed to the shooting games. (Gaming)'s just somewhere to go away from everything that goes on in your life.”

In a recent article in *Sports Illustrated*, a market research firm estimated that 93 million

initially because they were very hesitant,” said the graduate of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Secondary School in Mississauga, who moved here with his family five years ago.

“Then when we got the consoles into the hospitals, some of the X-Boxes and the TVs would get stolen. We knew we had to work with big medical companies to meet the requirements and it took about a year, but we made the necessary improvements to the karts. Other



Georgetown's Martin Omes (back right) was recently on hand for the recent delivery of a pair of video game karts at the Detroit Children's Hospital, donated by Gamers Outreach, a charity foundation Omes has helped build. At top left is Gamers Outreach founder Zach Wigal and centre is winner of Season 10 in CBS's *Big Brother*, Dan Gheesling, who raised the funds for the \$4,000-apiece karts through a stream-a-thon. Submitted photo

people in the U.S. are active in sports, but more than 194 million regularly play video games.

The idea to place game systems in the hands of young patients came from a friend of the Gamers Outreach group who was bored to tears during a lengthy stay in hospital. In consultation with medical professionals, the “GO Kart” was outfitted with a hydraulic lift that could be adjusted to different bed sizes and made easily accessible for its users.

“It was difficult to get the karts in hospitals

people had the same idea and it just didn't work, so when we finally got things up and running, it was amazing to see the reaction of the kids and their parents and the doctors first-hand. Now that we've established ourselves and people see what good things we've done in other hospitals, we've actually got a waiting list.”

Omes hopes to begin similar programs with hospitals in Canada and troops overseas and said he's recruited several new Gamers Outreach members up here.

Gamers Outreach also just debuted its Player 2 Program (<https://gamersoutreach.org/pilot-program-player-2/>), in which volunteers visit hospitals to play games with patients and teach medical personnel about gaming technology.

As well, Omes recently began the third season of his popular radio series *The Gaming Council*, featuring gaming personalities talking about the newest releases and different aspects of the gaming industry, which can be viewed on his Sound Cloud page.

Omes hardly fits the stereotype of a non-athlete and even admits he's not really that good at video games, but organizing the Halo and Gamers Outreach tournaments are projects he loves tackling.

Along with his philanthropic activities, Omes also juggles roles such as soon-to-be university graduate student, soccer goaltender and youth coach, sports broadcaster, weather station builder, baseball beginner and the manager of major tournaments for the worldwide video game company Halo.

His mother Eva jokes that son actually manages to live in two places at once—tending to his many commitments in the Maritimes and those based in Georgetown, while traveling to many GO Kart unveilings at hospitals south of the border.

During Omes's second year at Mount Allison, which is located in Sackville, N.B., it came to his attention that fellow students conducting experiments that were temperature-sensitive had to refer to data supplied by *The Weather Network's* station in nearby Amherst, located several kilometres away.

So Omes teamed up with some of the school's professors to undertake the project. Enduring a major storm during construction, it took a full year and tested Omes's knowledge about computer programming, but the weather station at the university was completed.

Continued on page 43 »



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