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## Schenectady startup scores big investment

Founder, CEO focusing his efforts on expanding market share

By John Cropley  
*Gazette Reporter*

Local startup company Kirsh Helmets has passed a major milestone in the effort to get its new motorcycle helmet to the mass market: \$1 million-plus in seed funding.

The money will allow accelerated product development, increased staffing and amplified marketing.

And on Sunday, with a bit of a symbolic flourish, they'll start west from Erie Boulevard — on the footprint of the Erie Canal, the original path west 200 years ago — to take their helmets to Sturgis, South Dakota, for the granddaddy of motorcycle rallies, where more than a half-million potential customers will be riding through.

Founder and CEO Jason Kirshon has built what the company calls a revolutionary motorcycle helmet, smaller and denser than traditional motorcycle head protection, and fundamentally different in design.

Its development, he says, an “extinction event” for the traditional helmet, which allows force of impact to continue in a straight line toward the skull of the person wearing it and relies on a thick layer of foam that lines the helmet to reduce the force to a safe level before it reaches the skull. The Kirsh design spreads the force of impact through a honeycomb of silicone gel lining the helmet, dissipating it so that no single part of the skull receives a harmful degree of impact.

Kirshon rides a motorcycle himself, and the helmet idea was born when he was attending one of the other big bike rallies in 2008 — in Laconia, New Hampshire, a state where helmets are optional.

“I witnessed approximately 100,000 bikers ride by, and only one had a helmet, and he was on a moped,” he recalls.

Kirshon has been a jack of many trades in his 43 years, including auto body technician



PHOTOGRAPHER: MARC SCHULTZ

Kirsh Helmets president Donald DeVito II and CEO Jason Kirshon at New York BizLab in Schenectady.

and boat mechanic. If one were to write the resume of a helmet designer, “It’s not what you would typically think,” he readily acknowledges. “I scrapped conventional thinking altogether.”

Rather than earn degrees in medicine, physics, polymer engineering and so on, he’s partnering with people who have that expertise, and can do the testing and research to perfect his idea.

Kirshon is focusing his efforts on expanding the market share for his helmets, which he says are far less bulky than the conventional certified models that dominate the market now — and vastly safer than the uncertified “novelty” helmets that provide protection against little more than a traffic ticket for riding without a helmet.

Kirsh’s first generation of helmets are DOT-certified for highway use. As the product line is refined and expanded, there’s a continual process of recertification for the new models.

The company is focusing now on half-

shell helmets, the open-face style preferred by highway motorcyclists who want to feel the wind. But Kirsh plans to move into three-quarter helmets and full-face highway helmets, too, as well as models for off-road riders.

As Kirshon focuses on the product, Donald DeVito II is focusing on the business of the business.

A former U.S. Army officer and veteran of the financial industry, he was an entrepreneur-in-residence at Siena College when he met Kirshon and came aboard as president and chief operating officer of Kirsh Helmets.

“Jay is the visionary,” DeVito said. “My role is to make sure I give him the best support I can.”

Support was needed.

“In order for a project to get this far without a gazillion dollars of funding, it took everything I had,” Kirshon said.

The needed support started to come



together this spring. Earlier this month, Kirsh Helmets passed the \$1 million mark in seed funding, thanks in part to the VirtualFund Network of investors at the New York BizLab, the State Street business incubator where Kirsh is a tenant.

The first investor was Square Peg Ventures, an early stage fund established by local attorneys Eric Leander and Matthew Wagoner of The Wagoner Firm PLLC, which also serves as general corporate counsel to Kirsh Helmets and to Impact Technologies, which owns the patent on the technology Kirsh developed.

A further interconnection: Wagoner Firm is part of BizHub, in-house advisers at BizLab.

BizLab founder and President Antonio Civitella expressed pride in the incubator's succeeding as a community and ecosystem to help Kirsh Helmets through the early stages of its lifecycle.

"Having Jason and Don as members of the BizLab has been a rewarding experience," Civitella said in a news release. "It's our mission to connect local entrepreneurs with the resources needed to grow smart and grow fast. They are adding to the rich history of our city, and we look forward to continuing to assist them on their journey."

Leander called the helmet design a "category killer" in the news release. "We recognized the market potential of Jason's technology immediately," he added.

Kirsh is manufacturing its helmets in New York of American products, most of

them sourced within an hour's drive of the home office:

- Specialty Silicone Products of Ballston makes the liner, and just this month took delivery of robotic tools to automate and standardize production.
- Cavallero Plastics is making the molded outer shells in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and they are being painted there as well. The chin straps are being made by Breton Industries in Amsterdam.
- A small but important foam tab is the farthest-traveled piece of the helmet, coming from a Boston-area factory.
- Final assembly is done at Coarc in Hudson.

The helmet is for sale now through only through Kirsh Helmet's website and will be available only for demo at Sturgis. In September, the Kirsh team will head to the American International Motorcycle Expo trade show in Ohio, selling helmets to attendees and signing up retailers. They also will attend Biketoberfest in Daytona, Florida, in October, where they'll be selling in person as well.

They're optimistic that as the only American-made motorcycle helmet, it will appeal to riders of American-made motorcycles.

Kirsh Helmets skipped the Laconia rally last month in favor of the Americade in Kirshon's native Lake George, but it would seem likely that they'll have more to bring to Laconia in 2018.

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