

## Capital Region Company Seeks to Remake Helmet Industry

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Left: Donald DeVito and Jason Kirshon

One Capital Region company is looking to revolutionize the helmet industry, and potentially become the area's next billion dollar business in the process. Schenectady-based KIRSH Helmets is months away from debuting their specialized motorcycle helmets to the public for \$245 apiece. That may sound pricey, but the helmet is an entirely new approach to protective headgear.

Using a hard outer shell with a patented fluid-displacement liner on the interior, the half-shell helmet better distributes energy from a potential impact than traditional helmets, which have softer shells and thicker, stiff Styrofoam compression, the company says.

"Whenever we get to a crossroad of how we choose what goes into the helmet, I always pick what is the highest quality," KIRSH Helmets founder Jason Kirshon said.

Last fall, KIRSH Helmets was one of seven companies to win a \$50,000 grant in a business pitch competition hosted by Fuzehub, a nonprofit organization that helps small and mid-size manufacturing companies in New York. Before that, the company secured over \$1 million in seed funding from several investors, including Square Peg Ventures, an early-stage investment fund of The Wagoner Firm, an Albany law firm. The safety testing for motorcycle helmets hasn't changed since the 1970s, when the U.S. Department of Transportation first began regulating helmets.

Kirshon calls the safety testing one-dimensional, and describes the linear acceleration test as inadequate to measure a helmet's ability to withstand an accident. In an accident, impacts typically occur differently than in that basic, head-on collision test, he said. Helmet companies over the past 40 years have sought to one-up their competitors by making lighter helmets, according to Kirshon. But that has done little to improve the quality and safety of motorcycle helmets, Kirshon said.

"The directive, for decades now, is 'let's make a lighter helmet,' and that's the only benchmark they have to be superior over the other helmet," Kirshon said. "In the race to create the lighter helmet, they're actually making a worse helmet."

Kirshon first thought of his idea for the helmet in 2008 while seeing thousands of bikers without helmets at the Laconia Motorcycle Rally in New Hampshire. Many bikers choose not to wear helmets because they're often uncomfortable and bulky, which can cause wind drag and subsequent neck pain to motorcycle riders, Kirshon said. And of those who do wear helmets, many are so-called novelty helmets, which are smaller and more comfortable but generally have little practical value as a safety measure in an accident.

"That's why people opt not to wear helmets, because there's not a great comfortable performing option out there," Kirshon said. "That was when I decided something really different needed to occur so people would choose to wear a helmet

when given the option."

KIRSH partnered with Sturgis Motorcycle Rally to become the event's official helmet. While currently only available for pre-order, Kirshon said he expects to debut the helmet for sale during the massive South Dakota motorcycle rally in early August.

"Starting from an area where you're in touch with the consumers and seeing how they all get together, it kind of gives you a vision of how marketable (the helmet) can be," Kirshon said.

KIRSH Helmets focuses on keeping production local, and works with several companies to produce their helmets. Their manufacturing operation is housed within the Specialty Silicone Products building, and other companies help produce other components. The Amsterdam-based Breton Industries produces the helmets' chin straps, and KIRSH also works with Cavallero Plastics in Pittsfield and Coarc Manufacturing in Hudson. The company focuses on hiring veterans, and currently has eight employees — though KIRSH COO Donald DeVito said they're expecting to hire new employees soon.

Kirshon said he's looking to bring the helmet manufacturing supply chain back to the United States from overseas, where large helmet-makers have shifted operations to countries with cheaper labor. All of the components in a Kirsh Helmet are made in the U.S. "Riders are very affluent...They spend a lot of money on their hobby," DeVito said. "When they can have a good quality safety gear choice, they'll make it. But there hasn't been one."

Both DeVito and Kirshon said the helmet technology is transferable to other helmet industries, like football or bicycle helmets, as well as military headgear. DeVito said that if KIRSH can move into four different helmet types, the company could become a billion-dollar firm within the next half-decade.

"I see us being a global firm," DeVito said. "I believe we're going to be the next billion dollar company out of the Capital Region."