

Project starts with a crash

• Lawyer's fall impetus for program to get children to wear bicycle helmets

BY SHERYL HARRIS
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Mark Hilkert doesn't remember much about the spill he took as he was biking on Akron-Peninsula Road.

He was knocked unconscious, and the details of the accident and what caused it are gone.

What he cannot forget is looking at his bike helmet later.

It was cracked through.

Hilkert, a lawyer who specializes in personal injury cases, is convinced that wearing the helmet saved him serious injury in 1991.

So a few years later, when his Akron law firm, Scanlon & Gearinger, was looking for a public service project to launch, it started a program aimed at getting kids to wear bike helmets.

"Some of the work we do, we see people who are injured badly when we know that if they were wearing a seat belt or if they had (worn) a helmet, that wouldn't happen. So it's sort of a natural thing for us to think of," Hilkert said. "So we contacted some of the schools in the area and they were really enthusiastic about it."

The firm visits about 10 schools each year. Elementary school children hear a lecture and watch a video on bike safety and then spend a month or so composing poems, rap songs or paragraphs to explain why wearing bike helmets is so important. The winners get bike helmets and stickers.

As bike-riding season starts with a vengeance, adults across the region are trying to teach kids how to stay safe.

Bike-related injuries are one of the leading causes of accidental death in children 5 to 14, and it is estimated that more than 400,000 children a year go to the nation's emergency rooms for treatment after bicycle accidents.



MIKE CARDEW/Beacon Journal

Bill Dent of University Heights rides over the bridge at Lock 29 in Peninsula at the start of what he said was his third bike ride of the season. For tips on bicycling safety, including a list of booklets and classes, with an emphasis on guidelines for children, see Page C3.

said.

His observations are borne out by a 1991 study by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, which estimated that only 15 percent of children under 15 years old wore helmets all or most of the time when cycling.

DeMoss says convincing riders that helmets are crucial to their well-being will take time.

"It's like safety belts in cars. Nobody would wear them at one point," DeMoss said. "It takes a long time" to change attitudes.

Ohio Sen. Grace Drake, R-Solon, doesn't want to wait. Last month, Drake introduced a bill (Sen. Bill 128) that would make it mandatory for bike riders to wear helmets.

Munroe Falls makes bike helmets available to residents for \$7.50. The normal price of a good helmet, usually made of polycarbonate,

overall safety.

It's not uncommon for private groups to get involved in safety programs. Although good intentions lie behind such programs, sponsors are often aware of their public relations value.

The Ohio Association of Pediatric Nurse Associates and Practitioners decided its new program was a great vehicle for letting children and their parents know about their profession and its concern with preventive medicine.

The nurses gave safety lectures and passed out more than 3,000 bike helmets to second-graders in more than 25 Ohio counties, including Medina, Portage, Sununit, Stark and Wayne.

Scanlon & Gearinger started its program after a brainstorming session on ways to improve the image

of lawyers. It may well be working.

"People are very appreciative of it," Hilkert said. "They can't believe lawyers are actually doing something beneficial to the community."

Uniontown Police Chief Steve Wolf launched a bike rodeo, which debuts in May, in hopes that cultivating good relationships with children will pay off as program graduates grow up.

"With the lack of respect that adults have toward authority, we want to show the kids that they can trust us and turn to us in times of need," he said. "By putting on special programs like this, we can show the children that we want to be their friends, just not somebody who writes tickets."

Correspondent Joanne Malene contributed to this report.