

Randy Swart: bike-safety crusader

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As a child, Randy Swart viewed his bicycle as his “freedom machine.” After all, he recently recalled, it was the only way to get around the small Virginia town where he grew up.

Today, even though Swart has plenty of ways to get around, the bicycle has become an even more important part of his life. It's not just because the 63-year-old Swart bikes 80 to 100 miles a week, partly for exercise, partly for errands and always for pleasure. Rather, bicycling — and more particularly **safe** bicycling — is a full-time mission for Swart.

Over the past three decades, Swart has played an instrumental role in bringing safer helmets to U.S. riders. Swart is director of the all-volunteer [Bicycle Helmet Safety Institute](#) — with a must-see [Web site](#) for anyone in the market for a bike helmet. And currently he is also vice chairman of the helmet and headgear subcommittee for ASTM-International, a nonprofit, voluntary standard setting organization.

Swart runs the 18-year-old helmet institute out of his Arlington, Va., home with a \$12,000 annual budget, all from consumer donations. He first became involved in helmet safety in the mid-1970s, when the Washington Area Bicyclist Association began testing helmets. At the time, he said, there were no standards. “There was an awful lot of junk in the market. You couldn't tell if a given helmet was protective or not.” In fact, he said, initial tests showed that some of the helmets then for sale offered “almost zero protection.”

After a heated battle, the industry adopted a voluntary safety standard in 1984 through ANSI, another standards organization. But this standard was eventually deemed insufficient largely because it wasn't mandatory. So under orders from Congress, the Consumer Product Safety Commission issued mandatory standards in 1999. Today, any helmet sold in the U.S. — no matter if it costs \$10 or \$150 — must comply.

The Helmet Institute played a critical role in the development of these standards, with Swart, a former U.S. foreign service officer, at its helm since the very beginning. Today, much of Swart's attention is devoted to the Web site, which last year attracted 800,000 visitors. This year, Swart hopes that number will grow to over 1 million.

Although helmets have come a long way in 30 years, there is still much room for improvement, Swart says. He believes helmets should provide more coverage; they should come further down on the sides and back. Helmets should also provide better protection in incidents with lesser impact. “Today there's good protection in major impacts but we need anti-concussion helmets” for more minor incidents. “It's not a simple thing” to do.”

And most importantly, Swart said, helmets need to fit riders better and more easily. “They don't fit most people as well as they should.”

To anyone who knows Swart, it shouldn't be surprising that this modest man declines to take personal credit for the nation's helmet standards. “No one person stood up and proclaimed we need better helmets,” he says. “There were lots of people.” Even so, for Swart's persistent efforts, we want to make him one of our Safety Crusaders.

If you know anyone who should join [our noble list](#), please let us know.

By the way, Swart has three bike helmets: a neon yellow for daytime and a white one with lights attached by Velcro for night. The third is another “screaming lime yellow,” which he wears when he and his wife Barbara use their tandem bike. “Our helmets have to match,” Swart says.

Previously: [Bike helmets - not wigs - save lives](#)