

Minnetonka couple invents innovative system to prevent motorcycle deaths

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John Henry will never shake his memories of the accident that inspired his life's work.

It was the summer of 1997, and he was driving on the highway as two nearby motorcyclists challenged each other to a drag race. One man was riding a new bike. The other straddled an outdated model. The younger bike pulled ahead like it was nothing, creaming his competition. Thinking it was over, the winner

let go of the throttle and began to slow.

The man on the older motorcycle couldn't tell that the bike in front of him was decelerating. Thinking he was catching up, he shot forward and rammed straight into its tail. Crunch.

Both of the riders survived, but it was a nasty crash that shook John to the core. He carried the trauma of what he'd seen home with him. He was certain that if only the first biker had been able to indicate to the second that he was decelerating, the accident could have been avoided.

Just the way it is with cars, motorcycle brake lights only come on when the rider squeezes the brakes, not when the rider releases the throttle to slow down. Unlike cars, motorcycles accelerate and decelerate much faster, leaving surrounding drivers less time to react to their movements.

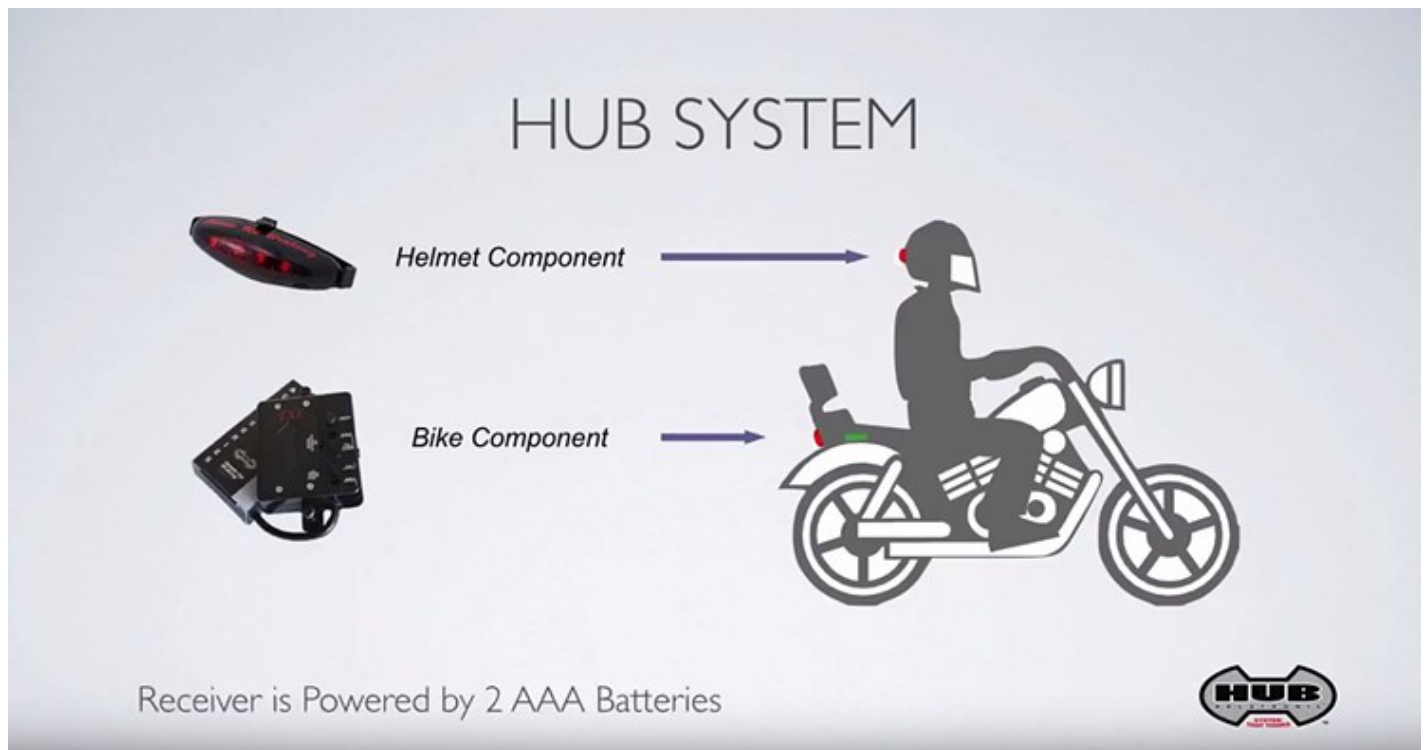
As an avid motorcyclist, John had seen and heard of many harrowing crashes and near-misses. He decided it was time the motorcycle industry came up with its own unique braking system – one that used tail lights to tell other drivers both when a bike was braking and when it was decelerating. He told his wife, Julie, that he would be the one to invent it.

“This is one of these things where he came home from work and he said, 'I've got all these ideas, I really feel like I'm at a point in my life where if I don't go out and explore this, it'll be one of those things I regret on my deathbed,'” Julie recalls.

John was an electronics technician, so he knew how to design the system he had in mind. But then he'd need engineers to build out the software, and a manufacturer to reproduce it by shiploads. He and Julie sat down to figure out a way to finance the project. They decided against taking out exorbitant bank loans, opting instead to save up little by little and fund it all in cash.

- [Troopers bust kid with pool in the back of his pickup truck](#)

It ultimately took 16 years, countless design revisions, prototype testing ad nauseum, and \$1.3 million to create what John had envisioned all those years ago: the “[Heads Up Braking system](#).”



The final product is a set of synchronized lights with a complex bundle of features. The lights are affixed to the back of the helmet. They're equipped with sensors to detect deceleration braking, and also distance between the bike and rider. If the rider is thrown into the road, the lights will flash an SOS.

Instantly activated when the ignition is turned on, the system also runs an automatic self-diagnostic test checking for battery strength and brightness levels every time it starts up again.

Over the past decade, her husband's perfectionism became a mania, Julie says. Even when funds were running low, when engineers bailed, when she and their business partners coaxed him to just settle for "good enough" and take the product to market, John wouldn't accept anything less than absolute precision.

"It took over all our lives," she says. "But now, we have product. We've got cases of product sitting in one of the bedrooms of our house. We got him to the point where we agreed, it's as perfect as it was going to get, and we ordered 1,000 units."

The Henrys now have a website and a social media page, and they're taking the Heads Up Braking system to local motorcycle clubs and shops to promote it. Once they convince the public and the motorcycle community to buy in, they plan to pitch the product to major motorcycle makers.

When folks have gotten a chance to demo the Heads Up Braking system, they've loved it.

Tjody Jacobsen, a member of the Twin Cities chapter of the Women on Wheels motorcycle club, says a number of her fellow lady riders bought John's braking system for \$259 apiece when he presented it to them last week.

"It's amazing. I wanted to ask him why he hasn't gone on *Shark Tank* yet," Jacobsen says. "You know, I just had an occurrence where we were riding in a group, and two people in front of me took off, I took off, and I'm accelerating to get up to them, and all of a sudden I'm like right on them because they had throttled down. It can be deceiving because it happens so fast."

Randy DuPaul of Dr. Mudspringers motorcycle shop in Spring Lake Park says that in his 20-plus years in the industry, he hasn't seen any new technology quite like John's Heads Up Braking system. The closest thing on the market would be deceleration lights that go around license plate, but they're lower on the bike and aren't nearly as functional, he says.

"There's nothing out there that does what this particular unit does," DuPaul says. "As soon as he came out with it, I put it on a shelf. John's invested over \$1 million in this, and years of his personal time to get something like this up and running, holy mackerel, it's just crazy. It's a life passion, is essentially what it is, and he's done a great job with it."

The journey to invent and manufacture the system has been a long and arduous one, Julie says. Marketing it will be just as hard. Lots of motorcyclists treat safety more flippantly than they should, and those who have the means to afford the Heads Up Braking system are even fewer.

Still, she feels confident that success will inevitably follow a good idea.

"My husband is brilliant," Julie says. "It's taken years to get to this point, and he's believed in the product so much, and in himself, that this product really can save lives. We've been married for 30 years and I still just get the warm fuzzies inside when I think about how proud I am of the work that he's done to get it this far."