

# Teen used his helmet – and his head

**SUSAN SCHWARTZ**  
*The Gazette*

By the time his mountain bike hit a rock near the bottom of a country slope, 15-year-old James Allen had picked up enough speed to be thrown right over the handlebars, landing on his head with so much force that he momentarily lost consciousness. His face, knees and arms were scraped and his brand new, top-of-the-line helmet was scratched, dented and cracked from the impact, a deep fissure on the right side.

That June day on a mountain bike trail in the Eastern Townships is a blur: what he remembers about the midday fall is what his 18-year-old brother, who was his cycling partner and who drove him to hospital in Montreal, has told him. "The first thing after the accident I remember was being in the car," James said. "On the way into town, I kept asking: 'What happened?' And my brother would tell me over and over..."

After spending the night at the Montreal Children's Hospital under observation, he was discharged with instructions to restrict his activities for four weeks – intended to reduce the risk of a second head injury on top of the first. "For a week afterward I was sort of disoriented and every time I tried moving I felt the blood rushing to my head – or from it. I was OK watching TV. When I'd move, I felt dizzy."

A month after the fall, James is feeling himself again and he's back to mountain biking. The only real casualty of the fall was his Bell helmet, which was still under warranty and replaced by the company for only a shipping and handling charge.

He realizes that the ending to the story would have been far less happy had he not been wearing a helmet, understands that the shock and damage sustained by the helmet would very likely have been damage to his brain.

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MARCOS TOWNSEND, GAZETTE

**Helmet-wearing Allens: Lee, David, James and Larry.**

## HOME AND FAMILY

## Worn right, helmets save lives

## HELMET

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"The reality is that the helmet cracked instead of his head," said Debbie Friedman, assistant program head of the Head and Spinal Cord Trauma Program at the Montreal Children's. "Even with a helmet, he sustained a significant concussion: there was a loss of consciousness and a period of amnesia, periods of drowsiness and a bad headache - all signs of concussion.

"The helmet reduced the severity of his injury. If he had not been wearing a helmet, chances are he would have ended up in the intensive-care unit - or worse."

As James's mother, Lee Allen, observed: "He owes his continued health and possibly his continued life to wearing a helmet."

The third of four children, James is from a family of cycling enthusiasts - helmet-wearing ones. The rule in the Pointe Claire family for several years has been Helmets When Cycling. Which is a good thing, because James is not the first Allen to fall on his head while cycling: his older brother has managed it twice.

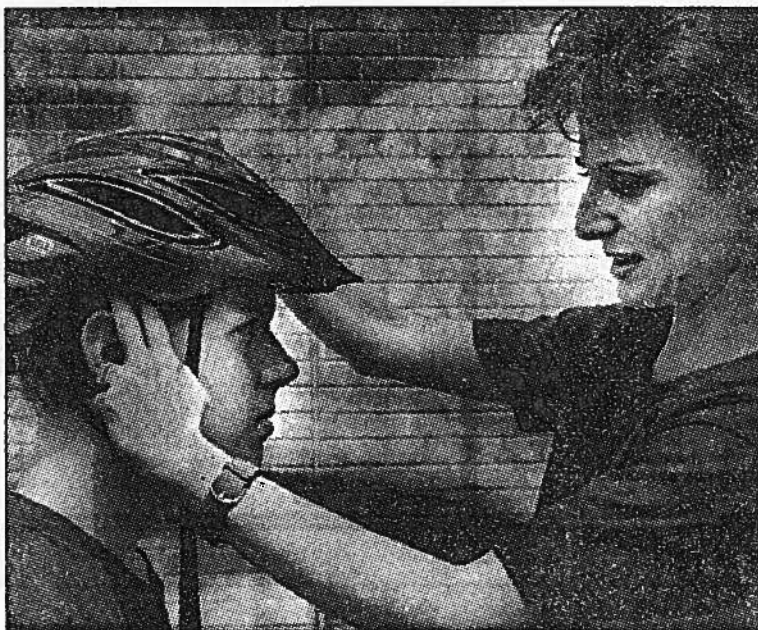
"I wasn't too happy about the rule at first," James said. "Then my older brother and I got into mountain-biking and liked it. When you're mountain-biking, you wear a helmet. It's as much a piece of equipment as your bicycle."

"When I go biking with my friends, if I'm going anywhere, I wear my helmet," said James, who enters Grade 10 in the fall at John Rennie High School.

Sure, some people think it's not cool to wear a helmet. "But you don't judge someone by their appearance or for wearing a helmet. I feel less protected when I don't wear a helmet."

James happens to like the helmet he wears now, a cool design - that's figuratively and literally: it's well-ventilated so the wind goes right through it - with a price tag to match: \$140. But a good helmet can cost much less: decent children's helmets are as little as \$15 or \$20.

Studies have shown that a helmet reduces



TEDD CHURCH, GAZETTE

Debbie Friedman shows James Allen how helmet should fit - with room to slide no more than one finger in at the temple.

the risk of brain injury by more than 85 per cent. Five Canadian provinces have passed laws making helmets mandatory for cyclists. Quebec is not one of them, although cyclists are encouraged by the transport department to wear helmets and, according to municipal bylaws, cyclists in Montreal West and Westmount and cyclists under 16 in Côte St. Luc must wear them.

With summer in full gear, cyclists are out in full force on roads, trails and paths everywhere. These recommendations are from Friedman and from the Montreal Children's Head and Spinal Cord Trauma Program:

- Wear a helmet with a label or tag to show it has been approved by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA), the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) or the Snell Memorial Foundation. "I'd like to push bicycle manufacturers to sell a helmet as part of the package, or to include a coupon that entitles you to it," Friedman said.

- Wear the helmet right. It should sit squarely on top of the head, not back like a beanie: falls are often forward. There should be no more than the width of one or two fingers between the eyebrow and the helmet. Fasten the chin strap securely. The helmet should fit

snugly, with room to slide no more than one finger in at the temple.

- Cyclists should make sure they're visible to motorists: at night, use reflectors on bicycles and clothing.

- If a helmet is involved in an accident, discard it, even if it looks fine. There may be damage you don't see. If you don't know a helmet's history, don't buy it second-hand.

"The reality is everyone on a bike should wear a helmet," Friedman said. Encourage your children. "You want them to know it's important they wear a bike helmet. Explain why it is important to protect your head, that it's not just a matter of forcing your kids to do something they don't especially want to be doing."

Children should start wearing helmets as early as when they're learning to ride a tricycle, she said. And their parents should wear helmets. "The message is not that when you turn 18 you take it off."

"I think there is much better awareness than there used to be. There is an increased use of helmets and wearing a helmet is becoming a more accepted pattern of behaviour: kids of 5 or 6 now notice when someone isn't wearing one.

"It's better, but there's still a lot of room for improvement: just this week three children were admitted to hospital after bicycle accidents and none was wearing a helmet."

There were 246 Quebecers who sustained serious injuries last year in bicycle accidents and 24 deaths. Half were younger than 20. About 80 per cent of cycling-related deaths are as a result of head injury, one of the leading causes of death and disability in children and adolescents. "Unfortunately, people do not understand that a traumatic head injury can cause permanent brain damage that can drastically change a child or adolescent's life," Friedman said. "Thirty per cent of head injuries can result in long-term deficits."

The reality, she said, is that it is cool to be safe - and that permanent brain damage, which can prevent you from moving, from reading, from becoming who you wanted to be is not