

# Keeping kids safer in the car: Blocking the buckle

September 9 2011, By Dennis Walikainen

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A babysitter was watching a pair of siblings who—surprise—were acting up in the backseat of a car.

“They would undo each other’s seat belts,” the sitter told Collin Veele, a mechanical engineering major at Michigan Technological University. Veele conferred with Alex Cotton, a mechanical engineering and economics major.

“We took it from there,” Cotton says.

Thus began the Buckle Blocker, which propelled Cotton to be named one of the “Top-Ten College Entrepreneurs of 2011” by Entrepreneur Magazine.

With Veele, Cotton created the device, which keeps little hands from undoing seat belt buckles in vehicles.

Working independently and starting with “a bunch of raw sketches,” they progressed to a 3D model. “We were able to start showing people what it looked liked and give them a tangible feel of the product,” he says. “We kept revising the design, and now finally have a functioning, injection-molded prototype.”

The result is a lever that slips over the buckle, keeping little hands at bay. Their slogan is: “Because there is nothing more important than what’s riding in your backseat.”

They have secured a provisional patent and a trademark on the name, and now the Buckle Blocker is ready for the market, he says. And he owes it all to another Tech connection.

“We won the elevator pitch competition two years ago,” Cotton says. “That’s what really got us going. Bob Mark played a big role in getting us involved with the competition and excited about Buckle Blocker’s future possibilities.”

Mark, a faculty member in the School of Business and Economics, died in May. He started the elevator pitch competition at Michigan Tech, now named in his memory, and he was a mentor to Cotton.

“There were many days, I would go into his office and talk with him about the Buckle Blocker, entrepreneurial dreams and life,” Cotton says. “He was an incredible mentor and friend.”

Mark also advised the Entrepreneurs Club, of which Cotton is now president, and Cotton plans on shopping the Buckle Blocker at entrepreneurship conferences in Fort Worth, Texas, and elsewhere.

And his mentor would be proud of a Michigan Tech innovator who hopes to help ensure the safety of inquisitive cargo.

Provided by Michigan Technological University

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