Iowa's Farm Safety Crusader

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Before the Mystery Club, most farm safety publications were designed for adults but often were given to kids,” Schwab says. “I wanted to create something specifically for young people.”

Seven bulletins are complete, with five more planned. Each focuses on a different topic, such as tractor safety or farm animals. The bulletins, which target ages 7 to 14, are being translated into French in addition to English and Spanish versions.

Another publication Schwab developed targets ages 4 to 8. What Would You Do? Helping Young Children Understand Farm Hazards includes 24 real-life situations and guides parents and children through a discussion of farm dangers.

Schwab earned bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate degrees from the University of Kentucky, where his graduate studies focused on the dangers of flowing grain. “I was doing fundamental analysis on forces related to flowing grain that hadn’t been done before,” he says. The next step was to use the data to reduce fatalities.

To spread the message he created a “Tug-of-War with Grain” display that first appeared at the 1993 Iowa State Fair. Participants pull on a rope attached to a load cell inside a grain bin mock-up. The amount of force on the rope is compared to the amount of force required to pull someone out of flowing grain – an impossible feat.

The display continues to be used annually at the Iowa State Fair and other events across the Midwest. “We still have grain fatalities, but much less frequently,” Schwab says. “We’ve raised the awareness level, and people are making better choices.”

Another success for Schwab, a safety crusader without a cape. He leaves that up to Captain Overalls.

Arm accident fatalities have significantly decreased in the 20 years Charles Schwab has been ISU extension’s farm safety specialist.

“There used to be 80 to 90 deaths each year on U.S. farms,” he says. “Now that number is closer to 30.”

There was a nationwide push in the 1990s to ramp up farm safety education. “I believe education has been a big reason for the decline in farm injuries and fatalities,” he says.

Schwab is director of ISU Extension’s Safe Farm program, which helps make Iowa farms safer places to work and live. As a professor in the agricultural and biosystems engineering department, Schwab has developed and taught farm safety courses, and his research has included more than 50 funded projects worth $4 million.

While Schwab is involved in many aspects of farm safety, his most notable contributions have been educating young people and reducing grain bin suffocations.

One could say Schwab’s alter ego is Captain Overalls, a safety crusader he helped to develop in collaboration with extension communicators. Clad in overalls and a cape, Captain Overalls stars in a series of Mystery Club bulletins.

Schwab says his display is “learning by doing. No matter how strong they are, people walk away knowing they can’t pull someone out of flowing grain,” he says.

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For information on borrowing a smaller scale “Tug-of-War with Grain” or other farm safety display from ISU for a farm safety camp, county fair or other youth group activity visit www.ag.iastate.edu/stories for a link.