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Auto safety activist Rosemary Shahan turns lemons into legislation

Shahan is the founder and president of Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety (CARS), a driver of some of the most important advances in auto-related safety and financial protection regulation.

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The gig: Rosemary Shahan is the founder and president of Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety (CARS). The Sacramento organization has been the driver of some of the most important advances in auto-related safety and financial protection regulation on the books today.

Shahan, 62, championed the nation's first lemon law in California, which has since been copied in every state. She was a major force behind the federal air bag mandate and laws protecting military service members from abusive car loans. And she's not finished.

Accidental activist: A native of Canton, Ohio, Shahan attended Case Western University on a full scholarship. There she met her husband, a naval officer with whom she lived in Italy and Greece, where she worked as a teacher.

Shahan found her calling when the couple moved to San Diego and had a run-in with a Volkswagen dealer in 1979. The dealer took their broken Dasher wagon in for repairs, but after several months hadn't fixed it, yet refused to release it from his shop when she asked to take it to another mechanic. Furious, she picketed the dealership for five months until the dealer gave in. "I was the world's worst picketer," Shahan said. "But I prevailed."

It could happen to anyone: The experience was revelatory for Shahan, who heard dozens of stories about rotten dealers thanks to her picketing. "I felt this was un-American," she said. "It shouldn't happen in a country where everyone's voice is supposed to matter."

Energized, Shahan began agitating among California legislators to pass a bill that would protect consumers from defective cars. In hearings, automakers defended current practices. But consumer data found that more than a million defective new cars a year were being sold to the public. The so-called lemon law, signed by Gov. Jerry Brown in 1982, gave dealers four chances to fix a car before it was dubbed a lemon and the dealer had to refund the car's sale price.

A full-time obsession: That same year, Shahan formed Motor Voters (short for Motor Vehicle Owners Together Ending Ripoffs) and threw herself into a new cause: safety. She and her husband moved to Washington, D.C., and Shahan joined the effort to require all cars to have air bags. It was one of the nastiest fights in a city known for them, but Shahan and fellow supporters refused to quit. Air bags have been required in all new passenger vehicles since 1989.

California state of mind: After a split with her husband, Shahan in 1993 returned to California, the nation's largest car market. She soon founded CARS, a registered lobbying group that allowed her to take up issues with politicians in Sacramento.

Not about the money: Shahan doesn't sport Gucci loafers or bespoke Italian suits like other lobbyists — not on the \$45,000 she pays herself. She hasn't taken a major vacation in years. "There were years I made only \$7,000 doing it," she said. "But I get to do what I love."

But what does she drive? When her 1988 Volvo finally gave out in 2010, Shahan bought a used Subaru wagon she found on Craigslist, taking care to get it inspected first. "I've never had a car payment in my life," she brags.

Letdown: For years Shahan pushed a voter initiative known as the Car Buyers Bill of Rights that would have dramatically changed the way dealers sell cars in California. But the initiative fell victim to backroom political wrangling. When a bill finally passed in 2005, it was a shadow of the original. "It could have been something great," she said.

Next up: In 2004, two sisters driving a car rented in Santa Cruz were killed after an engine fire disabled the vehicle's steering, leading to a head-on collision with a semi. The car had been subject to a safety recall a month before, but the rental car firm chose not to fix it. Shahan has been fighting to get federal legislation passed that would require rental car companies to remove all vehicles from their fleets until recall service is performed. "It's a matter of trust," she said.

Motto: When the going gets rough, which isn't uncommon when doing battle with multibillion-dollar corporations, Shahan tries to remember a line attributed to Mohandas Gandhi. "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

Personal: Shahan is a dog lover who once adopted a border collie with a broken leg. She dreams of driving up Pacific Coast Highway and seeing Northern California, but can never tear herself away from work long enough to do it. "My work is my hobby," Shahan said.

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