

Motoring mentors

Youths train to work with at-risk children

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INVERNESS — Dirt bike engines roared as wheels kicked up mud and grass in the backyard of Cornerstone Baptist Church on Friday.

Volunteer mentors from the Filter Youth Development program have been training on Honda dirt bikes all week long, and are ready to take off their training wheels to teach at-risk youths the value of maintaining good behavior and social skills.

“We get kind of a one-on-one teaching by the instructors so we can teach kids properly,” volunteer Miguel Rios said. “They’re going to be so excited about the dirt bike, that’s why we have to sit down with them in classes.”

After getting in touch with Filter, members of the National Youth Project Using Minibikes (NYPUM) are working with the volunteers, training them on how to ride a dirt bike and mentor kids at the same time.

Burke Breneman, of NYPUM, has a similar program on Florida’s east coast and recognizes the benefits of Filter’s objectives.

“In between (the kids) and the motorcycle is this awesome person that helps them sort out issues that they wouldn’t get help with ordinarily, so it kind of sneaks up on them,” Breneman said.

Founded by George Schmalstig and Chris Caravetto in March of last year, Filter has grown little by little, gaining a foothold in the Citrus County school system.

“We’ve been working our way back to prevention all along,” said Schmalstig, who has been working with troubled kids since 1997 alongside Caravetto

In collaboration with the Citrus County school system and Citrus County Sheriff’s Office, Filter has been added to the referral list for juveniles.

“We have a partnership with the school board, they helped us along and pointed us in the right direction,” Caravetto said. “We need some help with prevention in this county.”

Sgt. Joe Faherty, a school resource officer at Citrus Springs Middle School and a board member of Filter, understands the long-term effect this will have on children.

“It’s about the kids, we want to prevent delinquency and this is going to make our jobs easier,” Faherty said.

The Filter youth program, after detecting and interviewing the high-risk child, targets the factors affiliated with destructive behavior: unhealthy relationships, lack of skills and poor use of free time.

The dirt-biking class teaches juveniles, ages 10 through 14, to make better use of their time, but Filter is doing more than that.

“There’s more than just dirt bikes, we’re going to be in the schools with them, we’re going to be helping with homework,” said Caravetto. “The red Honda bikes will just be the incentive.”

Honda of Crystal River has donated \$40,000 worth of bikes to Filter’s cause.



“Our store has been around since 1981 and we’ve never heard of NYPUM. When George presented his idea to me, I immediately saw the good it would do for our community,” said Charlie Contopoulos, the business owner.

Schmalstig and Caravetto hope to take on more kids in September with the Filter courses, keeping expulsion, suspension and the Juvenile Justice System out of the lives of youngsters.

“It’s just another piece of the puzzle,” Schmalstig said. “Do you want to go to the Renaissance Center, or do you want to go dirt biking with me on Saturday?”

For more information on the Filter Youth Development program, call 352-228-0914 or go to the website www.filteryouth.org.