

Program for at-risk youths being launched

By Nancy Kennedy

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What do you do with your 13-year-old son who hasn't been in trouble with the law — yet — but is on the edge? According to George Schmalstig, who has worked with local at-risk youths for more than 14 years, there aren't many services available until after a child commits a crime.

"That's awful," he said.

Schmalstig and his friend Chris Caravetto formed Filter Youth Development, a nonprofit organization targeting at-risk middle school-age kids — using Honda mini-bikes, courtesy of NYPUM, National Youth Project Using Minibikes.

Since 1969, NYPUM, a philanthropic arm of Honda, has trained grassroots organizations to provide at-risk kids a 21-lesson rider safety course. Filter is NYPUM's 43rd program in the nation.

The public is invited to a launch event at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 15, at Honda of Crystal River, 1917 North U.S. 19, Crystal River. Parents, youth pastors, teachers and anyone interested in reaching at-risk teens are encouraged to attend.

"What got me into this — my job is to travel around the country and do training seminars for probation and corrections officers and put programs in place, and then I fly home thinking about my own community," Schmalstig said.

He said from 2002 to 2004, he and Caravetto ran an after-school delinquency-prevention program until it ran out of money and ended abruptly.

"I started at Cypress Creek 14 years ago and worked for Eckerd Youth Alternatives for about three years, and my wife's worked in juvenile justice for about 14 years as well, so we see the need," he said. "It's just wrong that a kid has to commit a crime before they can get the services they need."

Last year, Schmalstig had a vision-casting meeting and the next day someone handed him a check for \$5,000. He also met a man with 50 acres of property on County Road 491 two miles east of the light at Holder, perfect for a dirt bike track. Plus, the man's neighbor is a motorcycle mechanic whose son rides professionally, and the two men had been looking for a way to use the property and their skills to impact kids.

To top that off, Filter has received \$14,000 of the \$16,000 needed to cover the yearly cost of the program. "In late June we're expecting 16 Honda dirt bikes delivered to Honda of Crystal River," Schmalstig said.

By the end of July, Filter will conduct a training course for adult volunteers so they can be NYPUM certified. They hope to begin an after-school program at Citrus Springs Middle School in September.

For information, contact Filter Youth Development at 352-228-0914 or email info@filteryouth.org. Chronicle reporter Nancy

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