

Giant, red carrots

Filter program uses dirt bikes to help troubled teens

By Buster Thompson

Sunday, November 1, 2015 at 5:46 pm (Updated: November 1, 6:21 pm)

Fun, love, power and freedom.

These are the four basic human needs George Schmalstig believes his longstanding Filter Youth Development Program and its roaring dirt bikes can help Citrus County's troubled kids meet, healing them and their families.



"We're not a dirt-bike program ... that's just the carrot," Filter's co-founder and president said. "These dirt bikes are just an excuse to build a relationship with kids and parents."

Since its beginnings in March 2011, the nonprofit grew to be an intensive mentoring program, working to become a family support group where children ages 10 to 15 can learn social and problem-solving skills in a classroom setting before kicking up mud with dirt bikes.

"We really saw a gap in the community in terms of prevention work, and for mentoring, as well," Schmalstig said of himself and co-founder Chris Caravetto, who both have backgrounds in juvenile justice. "We really wanted to create something where we could mentor kids and also prevent delinquency."

Based on their progress in the classroom, kids can earn ride time at Cornerstone Baptist Church in Inverness, breathing fresh air and enjoying company with Filter's volunteer instructors, taught by the National Youth Project Using Minibikes, or NYPUM.

"Anything we can do, we help them out," said Burke Breneman, a NYPUM national training director. "This is probably the best job anybody can have."

Since they were ready to begin these classroom-riding sessions on Feb. 23, 2013, Filter completed five sessions, with 49 children and families graduating. Filter is now in the middle of its sixth session, with 12 children set to graduate in December.

"It's humbling," Schmalstig said about Filter's successes.

Filter's growth came from solely private donations, like brand-new Honda bikes every four years from sponsor Love Motorsports near Homosassa.

NYPUM also incorporated Filter as one of its 34 programs nationwide to lure at-risk kids to the exciting world of motorbikes.

"Honda motorcycles are like giant, red magnets, surprisingly for boys and girls both," Breneman said about using motorbikes as a tool to rehabilitate children. "It seems to be most kids' dreams."

Breneman was on hand with Schmalstig from Oct. 19 to 24 to train four Filter volunteers to become certified NYPUM instructors, easing Filter's workload to teach kids the basics of dirt bike riding all year long.

Ric Fritz, who works with the Citrus County's Property Appraiser's Office, was one of those four who used their free time to train.

"It's just being able to work with the kids more," Fritz said about what's driving him to get certified. "It's just rewarding."

“Their commitment to Filter, their commitment to me is incredible,” Schmalstig said about his fellow volunteers. “Those guys are better men for the fact they’ve participated.”

Also Filter’s NYPUM director, Fritz said he began volunteering with Filter in January after he and his family went through the development program last year, watching its positive strategies of mentoring, motivating and modifying work.

“It really changed us,” he said about becoming a “Filter family.” “It’s not a cure-all, but we’re going to provide you with tools to take home.”

“By the end of the experience, you just see their attitude has completely changed,” Fritz added. “They will see the child change, and they will see themselves change.”

Filter’s future calls for the development of a 35-acre property off West Homosassa Trail into riding trails and an education center. The property was leased out to Filter for 99 years by county commissioners back in October 2014.

“Cornerstone’s been gracious to us — they don’t even want us to leave,” Schmalstig said. “But we need to be proactive and get a home for Filter.”

Filter will start its first of two four-month sessions in February 2016, with the second session beginning in the fall of next year.

During these sessions, families meet from 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays at Cornerstone Baptist Church for classroom mentoring sessions. Kids then get up to four hours of riding each Saturday on the church’s backyard.

Filter also hosts separate riding courses during summer months, sponsored by the Inverness Elks Club.

For more on Filter and how to apply as a family or volunteer, visit filteryouth.org. For more information on NYPUM, visit nypum.org.

SO YOU KNOW

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For more information on NYPUM, visit nypum.org

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