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## Ride of a lifetime

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Filter Youth Development instructor Jim Flanagan and program participants ride dirt bikes around cones on Cornerstone Baptist Church property in Inverness.  
ZODEE TREIER/Chronicle file

INVERNESS — Filter Youth Development is more than a dirt bike club — it is an intensive mentorship program.

“Filter is an intensive mentoring program, because with traditional mentoring you have children spend maybe an hour or so per week with a mentor, and we are with our kids for 5½ hours per week,” said George Schmalstig, program founder and president.

Since 2011 Filter Youth Development — a nonprofit organization that leads the program of the same name — has become a support system for children ages 10 through 15. It helps youths to learn social and problem-solving skills — first in the classroom, then by kicking up dirt on dirt bikes.

"I spent 20 years in the juvenile justice system. We need to catch kids before they get into that system," he said. "We need good preventative programs. So, at the heart of it, it is delinquency prevention."

Out of 90 graduates of this program, he said, none of them were truly delinquents.

"These kids are more at risk to be 25 years old, still living at home without a job with no future. We have an epidemic of that as it is," he said. "We want to help build their confidence, establish good skills and inspire them to do something."

To do that, he said, they not only get to ride enduro motorcycles — which is a reward and recognition for a week's worth of good behavior — they also sit through a 90-minute class on social interactions, with parents attending a class "Kids are less social even as social media is booming," Schmalstig said. "If you ask any of our children: 'What will social skills get you?' they'll tell you: 'What you want,' because no person is an island. We all interact with people, and if you don't you are not going to fare well in life."

The most important part of these weekly classes is parent participation, he said.

"I'm always amazed at the attendance in that class. When you have broken kids, it is easy for society as a whole to say, 'No wonder — look at their parents,' he said. "You don't see that at Filter. We have dedicated parents who show up every week and are doing their best to raise their kids and seek help."

Based on their progress in the classroom, the youths can earn ride time at Cornerstone Baptist Church in Inverness, breathing fresh air and enjoying the companionship of Filter's volunteer instructors who are affiliated with National Youth Project Using Minibikes, or NYPUM.

NYPUM incorporated Filter Youth Development as one of its 34 programs nationwide to pull in at-risk kids to the exciting world of motorbikes. Since 1969, Honda has sponsored NYPUM by donating dirt bikes for this cause and that is how, he said, he got this program up and running.

Recently, Filter received a 5-Gear Award through NYPUM for quality assurance that every organization must adhere to annually.

"They make a visit to look at our bikes, paperwork, and to make sure everything is on point," he said. "This year we scored perfect; in fact, we have every year, but this year they wanted to raise the stakes and incentify it a little bit."

There are 34 NYPUM programs in the country, he said, and five programs have perfect quality assurance — with Filter being one of them.

Filter Youth Development will start its first of two 18-week sessions on Aug. 7, with that running through Dec. 2. The second session begins in spring.

During these sessions, families meet from 6 to 7:30 p.m. on Mondays at Cornerstone Baptist Church for classroom mentoring sessions. Youths then get up to four hours of riding time each Saturday in the church's back property.

Filter Youth Development also hosts separate riding courses during summer months, sponsored by the Inverness Elks Club. They have an upcoming three-day open riding course for \$50 from July 14-16.

For more on Filter Youth Development and how to apply as a family or volunteer, visit [filteryouth.org](http://filteryouth.org). For more information on NYPUM, visit [nypum.org](http://nypum.org).

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Reporter

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