

Cross-country trek behind a shopping cart raises awareness for homeless youth

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HAMILTON, ONT. – Joe Roberts knows what it's like to be young and homeless in Canada, which is why is he pushing for change. Literally.

Putting a twist on what has become a Canadian tradition of walking or running across the country to raise funds for various causes, Roberts is treading the same path while pushing a shopping cart, which stands as a symbol of homelessness.

The Push for Change started on May 1 in St. John's, Nfld., and has a goal of ending in Vancouver on Sept. 30.

The initiative is to raise awareness and money to end youth homelessness in this country, which affects an estimated 35,000 young people a year between 13 and 24 years of age.

Roberts and his cart made a stop in downtown Hamilton on Oct. 30 at Good Shepherd Youth Services' Notre Dame House, a 24-hour emergency shelter that provides 21 beds for homeless and street-involved youths between 16 and 21 years old.

Roberts, a native of Midland, Ont., told residents how his own life began to spiral downward after his father died suddenly from a heart attack. He was only nine years old, and an alcoholic and violent stepfather moved in.

In the mid-1980s, age 15, he left home. A year later he was in jail. At 17, he began injecting drugs and by 19, he was addicted to heroin while pushing a real shopping cart around the streets of East Vancouver.

But through determination and the help of his mother, Roberts was able to attend college, graduating with honours four years later. He then went into business and became president and CEO of a successful multi-media company, while making it onto the covers of Macleans and Canadian Business magazines.

Through it all, he never forgot the young people who were still trapped on the streets where he had been. "I made a promise on a street corner that if I ever got off the street, I would do something to pay it forward," he said.

A friend came up with the idea of pushing a shopping cart across the country and The Push for Change was born. A test walk from Calgary to Vancouver worked out the logistics that would be needed on a cross-country trek.

"Inside all of us is a possibility," he told the youth gathered at Notre Dame House. "Sometimes it's hidden from us... We make some mistakes. We start to believe that lie we tell ourselves or someone told us a long time ago. It's nonsense. It's not real."

He urged his listeners to "hit control-alt-delete" and "reboot" their lives, "because you're absolutely extraordinary. You're not the things that have happened to you. You're not the things that have been said to you. You're transcendent above all that."

Six months into his journey, Roberts is now preparing himself and his cart for a long winter.

"The Push for Change is making some noise and connecting some dots ... to put the systems and programs in place so no one ends up on the street alone and afraid," he said. "We, as a nation, could eradicate homelessness. If we can get the feds to invest those dollars, we could change the direction of this country."

Joining Roberts in Hamilton was a former Notre Dame House success story, Tyler. Born in Brampton, Ont., Tyler was caught in a web of mental illness and abuse within his family.

By the age of 17, he was on the street, eventually making his way to Hamilton where he used and sold drugs. He also fell into gang life, leading to a terrible beating that left him in a coma for seven days.

Through the work of rehabs and Notre Dame House, Tyler managed to wean himself off substances in December 2014. He has been sober ever since.

Now a student in social services at Mohawk College in Hamilton, Tyler advocates for the value of education, saying it has given purpose to what used to be a “purposeless soul.”

“Today, I have purpose. I feel like I’m in the right place in my life, like everything is going to happen the way it’s supposed to,” he said.

Loretta Hill-Finamore, director of Good Shepherd Youth Services, said Tyler was among more than 700 youths her agency served last year.

“We’re here to be a safe place for youth to land and to get them quickly out so they get out of the homeless system,” she said.

Young people can benefit from numerous resources, including family mediation, mental health and addictions counselling, schooling, legal and health clinics, meals and more.

“The dream is to end homelessness,” she said. “But the plan is to always bridge the gaps for youths.”