

# Pushing to end youth homelessness

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ST. CATHARINES — Joe Roberts knows he probably wouldn't be here today if it weren't for a mom who simply wouldn't quit on him, an OPP officer who stopped a suicide, and front-line workers who helped a troubled young man find his way.

But even after a remarkable turnaround saw him fight his way back from being a drug addicted, homeless young man to become a celebrated entrepreneur, Roberts said he knew he had a bigger mission in life.

He brought that mission — known as the Push for Change — to Niagara on Tuesday when he pushed the battered old shopping cart he's pushing across this vast country to raise awareness of youth homelessness.

Roberts, now 49, lived an average kid's life until his dad died at age eight. His mom remarried, but Roberts said his step-dad was so abusive that he eventually fled to the west coast at age 15 to avoid the conflict.

Without the life skills that come with age, he spiraled down: by 1989 he was battling addictions and living on what he calls "skid row" in Vancouver, scrounging for bottles and cans from dumpsters to try to buy drugs and living under a viaduct.

Roberts, who was greeted by a large crowd of cheering supporters as he crossed over the new Burgoyne Bridge to Memorial Park, eventually walked into a Salvation Army soup kitchen, and his mom flew across the country to bring him back after she was notified.

Back in Ontario, Roberts struggled and contemplated suicide, sitting at home with a loaded gun until an OPP officer talked him out of it.

He entered detox in Kingston and was treated for addictions at a Belleville rehab facility in 1991. He got sober, graduated from Loyalist College with a near-perfect grade average, and got into sales and management.

In 1998 he co-founded a multimedia company and at age 35 was a corporate CEO with good money, a fancy car and coverage on the cover of magazines.

"I got a second chance," he told the crowd on Tuesday. "I turned it around. But I wasn't any more fulfilled."

Roberts recalled a promise he made to himself when he was at his lowest in Vancouver, to grab hold of any opportunity for redemption if it ever came, and to help others in similar dire straights

"I wanted to do something to pay it forward," he said.

So far, he's walked 3,500 kilometres on his cross-country trek, with 11 months still to go. He's on his 11<sup>th</sup> pair of shoes and counting, with new bride Marie — an old high school sweetheart who he married after a decades-long separation — at his side.

Half the funds raised by walk participants in the St. Catharines event were being donated to St. Catharines-based RAFT, which provides a host of services aimed at at-risk youth including a 24-hour-a-day hostel.

RAFT executive director Michael Lethby said Roberts' cross-country walk is providing vital awareness of the pervasive problem of youth homelessness.

"Youth homelessness is hidden," he told Niagara This Week. "When people think of homelessness, they think of the shopping cart and the guy sleeping on the grate, not the 15-year-old sleeping on someone's couch or on the street."

The funds from the walk will also help RAFT's efforts to combat youth homelessness and school dropouts by working with Niagara schools to identify at-risk kids, said Lethby.

"There's direct correlation between (not) graduating high school and homelessness and poverty," he said. "It's not rocket science."

If at-risk youth do become homeless, that's when things can quickly become grim, said Lethby.

"That's when all the victimization happens, the sex assaults, the physical assaults," he said.

Roberts told walk participants that they were playing a key role in improving the supports and services that are vital in preventing youth homelessness.

"Until our outreach is better than the drug dealers and the gangs and the predators, we will continue to lose our children," he said. "You should be proud of being part of this today."