

SOUTH OKANAGAN

Pushing a shopping cart for change

by Deborah Pfeiffer - Story: 78622
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Photo: Deborah Pfeiffer

Joe Roberts pushes his shopping cart toward Keremeos, accompanied by an RV driven by a friend

Joe Roberts spent much of his early life pushing heroin into his veins on some of Vancouver and Toronto's meanest streets.

Now, Roberts is pushing a shopping cart to prevent other youth from going down that same road.

Roberts, 45 and a successful Coquitlam businessman, is now promoting a cause known as The Push For Change, uniting for homeless youth.

To draw awareness to the effort he is pushing a shopping cart from Calgary to Vancouver, with a few stops this week in the Okanagan.

"We know if we catch kids when they are young they don't end up dope fiends, living under a bridge like I was," said Roberts, as he pushed his cart along the highway between Penticton and Keremeos on Tuesday.

The walk, which started July 1 in Calgary and ends in Vancouver on Aug. 25, is a training run for his ultimate goal of pushing a cart across Canada in 2013 to raise money for street kids.

The healthy, clean cut man now walking the streets and highways of Western Canada, started glue sniffing when he was a 9- year-old living in Midland, Ontario.

He was soon smoking marijuana and gradually found his way to harder drug use.

“I was looking for a place to fit in the world. The opportunity presented itself and I started using drugs,” he said.

After being on and off the streets from the time he was 15 to 24, Roberts knew he had hit rock bottom when he sold the boots off his feet, so he could score heroin in East Vancouver.

He moved back to Ontario, did a stint in rehab and took business classes at college.

Following a return to Vancouver, Roberts built a Web development company from the ground up, becoming so successful that he was featured on the covers of prestigious Canadian magazines.

In the early 2000s, he suffered a relapse and began shooting heroin again, but by 2007 was back on his feet and working for Pragmatic Thinking, an organizational consulting company.

On a flight to Calgary with his business partner Dr. Sean Richardson, they came up with the idea to do something for at risk kids.

“We thought let’s do something like what Rick Hansen and Terry Fox did,” said Roberts. “We started looking for models of what people were doing coast to coast and there wasn’t anyone pushing a shopping cart, an image people associate with homelessness.”

Since July 1, he has walked 24 km six days a week, accompanied by an RV.

Along the way he has visited Banff and Revelstoke, and recently met up with youth groups in Kelowna. After Keremeos, he will head to Princeton and then to Abbotsford, where he will visit the Salvation Army. His last stop will be the Salvation Army Vancouver Harbour Light.

RV driver Robert Cook, a friend who once shared a similar lifestyle in East Vancouver, and cinematographer Ali Hamzah Virk are making the journey with him.

Virk is making a documentary to showcase Roberts’ trip pushing the shopping cart. He is also eager to raise awareness about at risk kids.

“I am doing this because people pay attention to films and they can change the way they think about things,” he said.

Roberts said the response they have received so far has been phenomenal.

“This is just the practice run, but people are already donating online or giving us money,” he said. “It makes me feel very confident that we can do the national event.”

For more information on the effort, go to www.thepushforchange.com