

A promise kept takes former addict across country



Joe Roberts is living proof there is no such thing as a lost cause. The former homeless drug addict has gone on to become a successful businessman and motivational speaker, and is hoping to raise funds to end youth homelessness by pushing a custom-built shopping cart across the country. Roberts is currently on a training trip from Calgary to Vancouver, and pushed his way through Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows on Friday.

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Joe Roberts is keeping his promise.

More than 20 years ago, when Roberts was a homeless drug addict living in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, he made a promise to himself and to God to give back any way he could should he ever get clean.

Now a successful business executive, he has been making good on that vow. For the past two months, Roberts has been pushing a custom-built shopping cart from Calgary to Vancouver in an effort to help bring an end to youth homelessness.

Called The Push for Change, Roberts' campaign hopes to raise funds for early intervention projects that aim to mentor at-risk kids attending alternative school programs or living in group and foster homes. He also hopes fund late intervention programs providing food and shelter for kids already on the streets.

“It can be something as simple as a blanket and a meal,” he says. “It’s about building trust, so when they want to make a change, we can get at them and help them.”

Roberts shared his story at the Salvation Army’s Caring Place Ministry in downtown Maple Ridge Friday morning as he pushed his cart through town. Having lived on the streets himself, Roberts can empathize with many of the shelters residents.

Growing up in Midland, Ontario, Roberts was a good kid, from a good home.

“We weren’t rich, but we weren’t poor,” he says. “It was a typical middle class Canadian home, with a dad that went to work and a mom that stayed at home.”

Life was good, until Roberts’ father died suddenly from a heart attack at age 35. Roberts was just eight years old.

“He was the kind of dad who was always there, he coached the baseball team and the hockey team,” says Roberts. “And at eight, I felt ripped off, because I lost my hero.”

His mother was a housewife with no career or education, and few options to help support the family. Soon she moved herself and her three children in with a new boyfriend, capable of supporting the family.

Who happened to be a violent alcoholic.

The love and laughter and joy of their home was gone, replaced instead, with abuse and fear.

“It was a dangerous place to be,” says Roberts.

While his father had always supported and encouraged him, this new man in his life had nothing but contempt for the children he now had to support.

“You’re stupid, you’ll never amount to anything, you’re a dummy,” he told Roberts.

“That’s when the hairline fractures in my self-worth began to show,” Roberts says. “I felt like I didn’t know where to fit into the world.”

But Roberts says he has long since forgiven his stepfather.

“My history is the greatest asset I have in reaching and talking and connecting with young people. I know what it’s like to not fit in,” he says.

At age nine, Roberts started getting high, first by sniffing glue. He dropped out of high school and left home at age 15, by which time he had moved on to cocaine and heroin. At 16, Roberts was in prison for the first time.

Upon his release, he was on a bus for Vancouver, paid for by Ontario authorities more than happy to seem leave their province.

“Within two months I was in the thick of Hastings Street,” he says.

Roberts spent much of his late teens and early 20s in a drug-induced haze, in a cardboard box under the Georgia Viaduct.

His life was dictated by where his next fix was coming from, his habit supported by collecting empty aluminum cans for refund.

“The Salvation Army was my safety net,” he says. “There was always a bowl of soup there for me.”

However, unlike many who end up on the 100-block of East Hastings Street, Roberts was able to escape.

One day in 1991, Roberts dragged himself down to Pigeon Park in the pouring rain to score drugs. Dope sick and soaking wet, he sold his boots, his most prized possessions, for a \$10 hit.

“When my feet touched that cold concrete sidewalk, I knew I was done,” he says. “I was broken.”

So Roberts prayed. He asked God to help him get clean, and in return, if he could get to the other side, he promised to give back anyway he could.

With the help of his mother, Roberts entered a residential detox facility in Ontario in July of that year.

After finishing his treatment, Robert went back to school, finishing two college diplomas.

“I noticed two things when I walked in there,” he says of his first day attending college. “The first thing I noticed was that six months ago, they wouldn’t have even let me into this building to use the washroom.

“The second thing I noticed was, wow, there’s a lot of aluminum cans here.”

Roberts soon discovered his survival skills on the streets could also be of use in the business world.

“I discovered I had the for gab, so I was a natural for sales,” he says.

In time, Roberts became CEO of the multimedia development company Mindware Design Communications, where in less than four years, he led the company through an 800 per cent increase in business. He made his first million dollars before he turned 35, and was named one of Maclean’s magazine’s 10 Canadians Who Make a Difference.

“My gifts were hidden from myself,” he says. “In 12 years, I went from pushing a shopping cart to driving a german sports car and wearing a gold watch.”

However, Roberts says he gradually lost sight of what was important. He stopped going to his addiction meetings, and started believing his own hype.

In 2005, after undergoing surgery, Roberts began to abuse his prescription medications, and soon found himself back in full blown addiction.

“It was a shameful thing for me,” he admits. “Everything I accomplished, I thought I had done it all by myself, but I hadn’t. And I hadn’t kept my promise.”

Roberts works as a management consultant and a motivational speaker now, and says he was inspired by Rick Hansen and Terry Fox to take to the streets and start pushing his cart. He came up with the idea with the help of his business partner, Dr. Sean Richardson, a sport psychologist.

Since July 1, Roberts has been pushing the cart 24 km a day, six days a week. The cart, he says, symbolizes the problem of homelessness, while the fact that it is empty represents the hunger many on the streets are faced with.

The cart itself is custom built from aluminum, complete with handbrakes, and was designed by a group of school kids from Pinetree Secondary in Coquitlam.

Thanks to generous support from Telus, Roberts says the campaign costs have been covered completely.

“That means 100 per cent of donations we raise go to kids at risk,” he says. “Their support has been incredible.”

Most mornings, Roberts and his crew are up before the sun, and after breakfast and a few espressos, Roberts is on the road by about 6 a.m. With a goal of 24 km per day, Roberts pushes the cart in four six-km shifts.

“We’re averaging about 11 minutes a kilometre, which is faster than we’s thought,” he says.

After finishing up between noon and 1 p.m., Roberts spends 15 minutes in an ice bath up to his waist.

“I’m 44-year-old soft in the belly businessman,” he says. “It’s painful, but the regenerative benefits are worth it.”

After nearly two months on the road, Roberts’ skin sports a deep tan, and his legs and arms are lean and sinewy.

Following Roberts along the route from Calgary to Vancouver in an RV is his support crew, consisting of driver Robert Cook, and photographer and documentarian Ali Hamzah Virk.

Virk attended the Vancouver Film School, which is located in the Downtown Eastside and says what he say there inspired him to help Roberts on his journey.

“It always shocked me how people would walk right past people on the streets,” says Virk. “The kids don’t deserve to be there.”

Cook used to be one of those kids. Like Roberts, Cook was once a homeless drug addict in the Downtown Eastside, where he and Roberts were partners in crime.

“We reconnected over Facebook a few months ago,” says Roberts. “He was my wingman back in the day... so it’s real special to have him along on this.”

The finish line for this leg of Roberts’ journey is familiar ground: the Salvation Army’s Harbour Light shelter in the Downtown Eastside. Roberts hopes to get there this Saturday.

However, this 1000-km trip is just a training run, he explains. Next year he plans to push the cart coast-to-coast, from St. John's, Newfoundland, to Vancouver. The trip will likely take him more than a year, and cover more than 7,200 km.

Roberts says he wants to help young people realize the potential they hold inside themselves, so that they might avoid a fate similar to his.

“No one says in high school, I want to be a dope fiend,” he says.

With 65,000 young people homeless in Canada, either on the streets or in shelters, its time for people to Canadians to act.

“If all we do is create awareness then we would have failed as a project,” he says. “Engagement is the key, if we can get enough people wrapped around this and they get their hearts in it we can make a real impact.”

Roberts uses himself as a perfect example that there is no such thing as a lost cause.

“It would have been easy to write me off,” he says. “But I made that transformation. Not everyone will, but everyone is capable of it.”

- For more information about The Push for Change, visit www.thepushforchange.com.