

Teen homelessness fundraiser an epic push for Joe Roberts

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CBC News

People in New Brunswick may come across a man walking along the highway over the next few days, pushing a shopping cart.

He's not homeless, but Joe Roberts used to be, and he's using that experience to lead a cross-country fundraiser called The Push For Change, to support young people at risk.

Monday found him in Moncton, and he explained what was happening to Shift's Vanessa Vander Valk.

"Each day we do 24 kilometres," said Roberts. "The first half of the day was great, but the last half of the day, boy, it was pretty hot."

Roberts' journey started in Cape Spear, Newfoundland in early May, the most eastern point of North America, and so far he's logged over 1,700 kilometres through the four Atlantic provinces.

Pushing the shopping cart isn't just a symbol of homelessness, it's something Roberts knows well.

"My story is not too dissimilar to about 80 per cent of young people who find themselves [on the street]," he said. "They came from a troubled home, made some poor choices. By the time I was 19, I was pushing a shopping cart around the streets of Vancouver. I was struggling with some very serious substance abuse issues, and quite frankly, I was lost.

"But thanks to a mom that wouldn't give up, and a police officer who was there for me, I got a second chance to redo my life, and in less than 12 years I went from that kid pushing a shopping cart around the downtown east side to being on the cover of Canadian Business as a celebrated entrepreneur."

Roberts hopes his story will help inspire people to get behind The Push For Change.

He said it's not just about emergency services for kids already in need, but to set up programs to help them out before they get there.

"The thing that we're championing is prevention stuff. Helping that young person when they're in Grade 9, Grade 10, when they're dealing with the mental health challenge, when they're dealing with maybe the substance abuse or maybe they are in a home that they shouldn't be, it's not a good home.

"The best place for us to invest in young people is when they're still sitting in a classroom. Before they end up being cycled out, and being in street involvement. Our campaign is to talk about those things that need to happen, to invest upstream in the school system."

Events in Moncton, Fredericton

In addition to the walk, there are events scheduled in many communities that Roberts will pass through, including Moncton on Tuesday.

Plus, there's a special one started by people in Fredericton.

"My worst day in Vancouver I ended up selling the shoes off my feet, in a moment of complete and utter humiliation, and I never thought I would make it out," said Roberts. "That idea was picked up by some folks in Fredericton and they started something called the PFC Barefoot Challenge.

"Not everybody can walk across Canada, but everybody can do the barefoot challenge. How it works is that you take off your shoes and socks, you text "boots" to 41010 and you make a donation, you share it on social media and you challenge your friends."

Roberts is fully committed to the challenge, and it won't wrap up until September of 2017 if he stays on schedule.

"This country loves these kinds of treks, it's why they work," he said. "Our prime minister said we're a resilient country, we stand up to support one another."

"We're going to end this campaign on Canada's 150th anniversary as a nation, and I can't think of anything cooler than walking across the country and asking Canadians to join us to support young people, and finishing this 9,000 kilometre, 17-month journey in Vancouver in September, 2017."

You can find out about events in Moncton Tuesday and in the future at <http://www.thepushforchange.com/>.