

Man pushing shopping cart across Canada to help end homelessness

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Joe Roberts, a former homeless youth, is pushing a shopping cart across the country to help end youth homelessness. Roberts was on P.E.I. earlier this month knocking a third province off his list.

In 1989, Joe Roberts was a homeless teenager pushing a shopping cart around the streets of Vancouver collecting bottles and cans.

Roberts struggled with mental health and addiction issues and grappled with various pieces of homelessness between the ages of 15-20 years old.

“Sometimes I had a place to live. Sometimes I didn’t. The chronic homelessness came towards the end where I was outside all the time.”

The thing he missed the most on the street was engagement, as he felt invisible to the world he was living in as people passed him by.

“When you are on the street, there is a real stigma attached to homelessness and feeling rejected from society.”

With the help from his mother, Arlene Quesnelle, and a concerned police officer, Roberts was able to turn his life around.

Roberts went back to college and graduated with honours pursuing a career in the business world.

“In less than 12 years, I went from being a kid pushing a shopping cart as a homeless young person to being a celebrated Canadian entrepreneur and finding myself on the cover of Canadian Business.”

Roberts, who now lives in Ontario, left the corporate world in 2011 to pursue public speaking and has recently turned all of his attention to The Push for Change - a campaign to raise awareness and money to help end youth homelessness in the country.

The idea for this campaign blossomed from a conversation that Roberts had on a plane with Sean Richardson, a former business partner.

His friend continues to offer his advice but Roberts and his wife, Marie Roberts, are now the driving force behind the campaign.

“We believe that if a problem is predictable it is preventable.”

Roberts speaks of the dangers that youth face when being homeless including over-sexualization and victimization with the possibility of getting involved in gangs, crime and stealing to meet basic needs.

In addition to that their health suffers, as their dietary needs are not met, personal hygiene is neglected and carry a high risk of contracting infectious disease.

Not to mention the feelings of hopelessness, shame and worthlessness that go along with it, said Roberts.

To visualize it, he says to imagine the toughest day you’ve ever had.

“Now, go to that place in your mind, remove all of the supports that you had in place while that was going on, take away your money, take away your house, take away your friends, take away your family. Take away all of your emotional supports and put you on a park bench. Now deal with that life situation.”

Roberts said this situation is even worse for youth calling it ‘brutal’ as they are far more vulnerable than adults.

Beginning on May 1, 2016, Roberts started his cross-country trek to launch an important conversation about youth homelessness by pushing a shopping cart province to province.

“A shopping cart represents a symbol of chronic homelessness,” said Roberts.” It represents an outcome that we don’t want to see for any young Canadian.”

Roberts was in P.E.I. July 17-22 travelling 114 km from tip to tip.

He has already traversed Newfoundland and Nova Scotia and is currently working on New Brunswick.

The campaign carries a financial goal of collecting 50 cents from every Canadian with the money going towards Raising the Roof, a national charity that aims to create long-term solutions for homelessness.

Roberts will be on route for another 14.5 months and hopes to finish in downtown Vancouver on Sept. 30, 2017.

“We want to leverage our time in the media to talk about what we can do as a country to move towards a place where we can prevent, reduce and end homelessness.”

To donate visit www.pushforchange.com.

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