

Country-crossing advocate from Barrie poised to enter Ontario

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Push for change

submitted photo

Barrie's Joe Roberts stops for a photo by a graffiti wall in Quebec on his Push for Change cross-Canada tour. (Sept. 6, 2016)

Barrie Advance

As Joe Roberts pushes his empty shopping cart through Quebec this week, advocating for homeless youth, it feels like boarding a roller coaster.

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The Barrie man started his Push for Change cross-Canada tour quietly in Atlantic Canada in May and is anticipating the big drop when he arrives in Ontario Sept. 22.

“What I feel in Quebec right now is I’m on a roller coaster. The part that goes up and you hear the tick, tick, tick. You continue to gain elevation and you’re thinking ‘boy, I’d love to get off the ride but it’s too late now’,” he said while finishing another 25-kilometre walk Tuesday morning.

“When we reach that pinnacle at Hawkesbury bridge and are met in the province by OPP Commissioner Vince Hawkes, that’s what we’re feeling right now.”

During Roberts’ 17-month journey he will trek 9,000 kilometres from one end of the country to the other.

“I’m approaching 2,600 kilometres and I’m not tired.”

He’s worked on a partnership with the OPP and officials will greet him as he walks from Quebec into Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

Much like Terry Fox, Rick Hansen and Clara Hughes did before him, Roberts hopes to make people aware of his cause.

He’s hoping to have big names such as Walter Gretzky, The Tragically Hip and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau involved in his journey along the way.

Roberts was once homeless himself, leaving home and dropping out of Barrie Central Collegiate Institute at 15 and moving to Vancouver at 19. But as a drug addict, scoring his next hit took priority over paying rent and it wasn’t until 1989 that he turned his life around, later earning two diplomas and becoming CEO of a million-dollar company.

Through his Push for Change, Roberts has so far raised \$100,000, which will support charities across Canada and the national Raising the Roof organization.

He's using social media to engage people during his journey and is now challenging students to learn more about Canada's history and geography, quizzing them about sites he has encountered.

"Education is important. One of the things we're doing a lot is speaking to boards of education about graduation rates," Roberts said.

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