Push for Change arrives in Renfrew

A shopping cart being pushed down the street by a homeless person is a powerful image.

Just imagine what message is sent when a former homeless youth turned successful businessman is the one behind the cart.

Joe Roberts has set out on a mission using the shopping cart as a symbol of change.

His walk across Canada to support the end of youth homelessness will take 517 days and 9,000 kilometres, with 400 community events in all 10 provinces and the three territories. His journey included three kilometres in Renfrew.

On day 151, Roberts, who is the executive director for The Push For Change, brought his inspiring message to Renfrew youth at the RCAF Wing on Sept. 28.

"It's an initiative that we kind of cooked up on how we could engage Canadians in a conversation on what we could do to prevent and reduce youth homelessness," said Roberts. "In 1989 I was on the streets of Vancouver. I got a second chance, I had really great community support. I had support from the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) and a mom who wouldn't quit. I got a second chance, went to drug rehab, back to college and within 12 years I went from a young person with very low probability of success to finding myself as a celebrated Canadian entrepreneur."

He says he was unfulfilled as he was living the Canadian version of the American dream.

"There's still something missing and I made a promise back when I was in Vancouver that if I ever got off the streets I would do something to pay it forward," said Roberts. "So we start having a conversation how do you engage Canadians, how you raise awareness, how do you inspire Canadians to think differently about a very difficult issue."

A friend of his told him when Canadians want to raise awareness for things they walk across the country.

"I said I'm 45 years and I don't feel like running across the country," said Roberts, but his friend had a suggestion. "I got a better idea, why don't you push a shopping cart? It is a symbol of chronic homelessness, the thing you are trying to avoid. I was sort of smitten by that idea and so we began planning and that was five years ago."

His journey started on May 1, when he began walking 24 kilometres every day and on Sept. 22 he arrived in Ontario.

"I was met by our community safety partner the OPP and the world's greatest hockey dad Walter Gretzky and on day 149 we reached Parliament Hill," said Roberts. "We were notified that we're actually going to be in the House on Oct. 25 when a declaration is going to be read in support of Push For Change."

Along the way he is having conversations with not only youth but with municipal stakeholders, companies, law enforcement, educators, and health care and children's aid officials - "About what we need to do to protect people and prevent homelessness from happening. I was a good kid from a good family from a town just like this but I came from a family conflict that I couldn't live with and left home at 15," explained Roberts. "Shortly thereafter I left school and so the two big pillars of support in my life gone, and quickly I cycled out and showed up on the streets of Vancouver."

He thinks because it is a known problem it can be addressed.

"If it's predictable, it's preventable and so when I step back and said 'How can I lend my voice in a transparent way to this national issue and point to the particular pieces that we need to improve on to support young people's transition into adulthood?' Push for Change gave us a backdrop to have that conversation with Canadians," said Roberts.

The trip across Canada is also a fundraiser with a goal set at $17,000 or 50 cents from every Canadian, which will support Raising the Roof, to fund The Upstream Project – a school-based prevention framework to end youth homelessness.

When it comes to rural homelessness and the current situation in Renfrew County, he admitted he did not know specifics but was able to speak on the topic in general.

"Rural homelessness is very much invisible, it's one of those things that's unseen," said Roberts. "That young people or older people, they are couch surfing or they are living in poverty or the living environments that are not conducive to growth and functionality. So there's a stifling and an inability to break that cycle whether it's poverty, whether it's mental health, whether it's trauma, whether it's addictions. It becomes very difficult and then there's this notion of if I don't see it in public I don't walk down the street and see somebody sleeping on a piece of cardboard then you don't have that issue and so it's a public mindset but it's also a municipal government mindset sometimes that I don't see it it's not here and it's very much here."

Renfrew Town Coun. Tom Sidney, who works as a youth counselor in his day job, agrees with Roberts.

"It's hard to pinpoint stats because it is not seen like in the big cities," said Sidney. "It becomes hidden homelessness, it's the couch surfing and the things you don't see. It does exist."

When asked what kind of advice he would give a youth today, Roberts recalled a story from 1989.

"A man named Gus came up to me and at the time I was disheveled, had dirty hair, layered old clothes and looked I looked homeless," said Roberts. "He put his hand on my shoulder and he said 'Joe, on the exterior you don't look good, but on the inside you're an incredible human being. There's more you can see inside every single one of us despite their circumstances but things that happened to us and happening around us. The things that have been said to us or the things we say to ourselves, underneath all of that is something absolutely extraordinary, the only way we find what that is to get in action,' so I advise anybody young or old find something that you're passionate about in your life and it begins to unfold in an incredibly way, but we have to have the courage to take those steps."

For more information or to follow his journey across the country visit: http://www.thepushforchange.com/.