

# Pushing to change youth homelessness in Smiths Falls

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## The Push for Change shopping cart makes its way to SFDCI

*Jennifer Miller, the executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Lanark County (left), Joe Roberts, co-founder The Push for Change (second left), Grade 10 Civic's teacher, Erin Burt (behind Roberts), Jenna Morency, 15, (centre) and Brittany Smith, 14, (right) walk along side Roberts from Town Hall to SFDCI on Monday Oct. 3, 2016. Evelyn Harford/Metroland*



Joe Roberts, a former homeless man who's pushing a shopping cart across Canada to support the end of youth homelessness, made his way through Smiths Falls on Monday afternoon with a legion of community supporters.

As Roberts approached Smiths Falls' town hall supporters chanted, "Push for Change, Push for Change, Push for Change," which crescendoed as he approached the microphone to say a few words of thanks to those who came out to support the cause.

"You give me the courage to keep going," said Roberts as he addressed, police officers, town councillors, community volunteers and some 50 Grade 10 Civics students from Smiths Falls District Collegiate Institute (SFDCI) who came to walk with him from town hall back to the high school, where he gave a heartfelt, inspiring presentation later in the afternoon.

"I came from a small community and I know that youth homelessness is a hidden problem," said Roberts. "I wanted to be visible for young people who aren't seen."

### **"Don't be afraid. Tackle your dreams. Joe Roberts, Push for Change**

Roberts spoke at SFDCI about his own struggles with addiction, suicide and homelessness that stemmed from an abusive stepfather his mother married when he was only eight years old.

Roberts said it was the emotional abuse his stepfather subjected him to that contributed to his eventual drug addiction, which started when he was only 15 as a way for him to cope with the abuse he experienced at home.

Roberts' addiction eventually took over and he found himself wandering around Vancouver's downtown east side, addicted to cocaine and heroin some two years later.

It was when Roberts found himself living under a bridge in Vancouver that he decided to reach out to his mother, still living in Ontario, for help.

Today, with the help of his supportive, and loving mother, Roberts is a clean, successful entrepreneur committed to raising awareness about youth homelessness.

Roberts said he's fighting for the youth who don't have a supportive mother like he did, who helped him get off drugs, the streets and get help for his suicidal thoughts which came to the forefront when he returned from Vancouver.

When his mother got him back from Vancouver, the young Roberts was still struggling with mental health issues and recalled the moment when he picked up a 9mm pistol with the intention to kill himself. In that moment, his mother stepped in and called the Ontario Provincial Police. The officer who responded to that call, Cst. Scott MacLeod, helped to turn Roberts' life around.

He went back to school, got clean and became a successful entrepreneur whose been walking for 156 days and over 3,000 kms in support of the Push for Change.

One of the students who walked with Roberts from town hall to the high school was 15-year-old, Grade 10 Civics student, Jenna Morency, said she was inspired by Robert's tough journey.

"It made me feel pretty good to be a part of it," she said. "Actually hearing him talk about (his story) gives more of an impact."

Roberts, who also come from small town Ontario, shared his struggles of couch surfing, what he described as the first step into homelessness and common issue towns like Smiths Falls.

Terrilee Kelford, the executive director of Cornerstone Landing, a charitable organization that works to address youth homelessness in rural areas, said her organization has had over 70 referrals, 50 per cent of them from Smiths Falls, since Jan. 1, 2016.

"We talk all the time about hidden homelessness in rural communities," she said. "We have kids sleeping under bridges and in cars. The idea of kids helping kids is always a nice message to send."

Roberts addressed the teens at SFDCI in a relatable and accessible way. He encouraged the students to seek our help if they need it.

"Don't be afraid. Tackle your dreams," he said.

The Smiths Falls community wasn't shy about contributing financially to the cause.

Town councillor, Loraine Allen, presented a \$200 cheque, on behalf of the Municipal Drug Strategy Committee, for the Push for Change Foundation and Chris Fagen, the President and CEO of Canadian Addiction Rehab, presented a cheque through Huge Colton, a strong community leader, for \$3,000.

Fifty per cent of the funds raised for Push for Change will remain in the community, said Fraser Scantlebury, the executive director of the United Way for Lanark County and will be given to youth centres and programs like Cornerstone.

Roberts has approximately 6,000 kms left in his cross-country journey, which started in St. John's, NFDL on May 1, 2016.