

Push for Change passes through Northumberland

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At his earliest event to date on his coast-to-coast Push for Change tour, Joe Roberts (in the white jacket) is seen with Cramahe Township supporters at 7 a.m. Friday - from left Rotarian Cheryl Sams, OPP Constable Melissa Palleschi, Mayor Marc Coombs, Councillor Don Clark, OPP Constable Christie Basoe-Shred and Rotarian Lee Clement. CECILIA NASMITH/Northumberland Today

COLBORNE - Cramahe Mayor Marc Coombs showed up at the town hall in Colborne before 7 a.m. Friday with a half-dozen take-out coffees to bring some much-needed warmth to an unusually early civic event.

In fact, honouree Joe Roberts said this was the earliest event he'd had so far on his coast-to-coast Push For Change marathon.

That chilly morning also marked the first time he'd broken out his winter toque, Roberts added.

At that point, according to his website, he had walked 3,195 kilometres, had 5,805 to go, and had consumed 805 litres of spring water and 166 bowls of oatmeal.

The Colborne Rotarians who showed up to greet him were already familiar with the man pushing the odd aluminum cart, as Roberts had made a visit last spring to District 7070 to drum up support for his cause — homelessness among young people.

The story he shared is nothing unusual, except for a very fortunate happy ending.

Roberts struggled with substance abuse as a young person. He experienced homelessness himself, and has never forgotten the experience. He credits a brush with the law with turning his life around.

He went on to graduate from the Loyalist business marketing program and, from there, to become head of an extremely successful multi-media company.

Roberts is also an author — one of the small contingent of people greeting him in Colborne had brought along her copy of his 2003 book *7 Secrets To Profit From Adversity* for an autograph.

His visit earlier this year was in advance of the May 1 start to Push For Change, which will see him push a shopping cart across Canada with the goal of raising \$17-million (or 50 cents per Canadian). With these proceeds, Push For Change will work with Raising The Roof Canada and A Way Home to create the Upstream Project, a prevention strategy that will be rolled out in communities across Canada.

Along the way, he also hopes his example will spark awareness of youth homelessness, and perhaps inspire young people who are facing issues similar to the ones he once struggle with.

Cramahe Councillor Don Clark, who'd had the chance to talk to Roberts before he set off on his day's journey, said he covers 24 kilometres each day.

As the OPP escorted his shopping cart toward the town hall, Roberts was delighted to see the dignitaries waiting for him. Each received one of his Push For Change pins and, in return, he got a Cramahe Township pin from Coombs.

The shopping cart he pushes is meant to symbolize homelessness, but it is not the typical grocery-store model. It was carefully crafted for the task of being pushed cross-country, with special anti-friction wheels and lightweight aluminum body (which, he admitted, can create challenges on windy highways).

Roberts said he is grateful for the support he is receiving from groups like Rotary, and he could not say enough about the OPP officers who are acting as his community-safety partners during his time in Ontario.

"We are in very good hands," he said. "They are boots on the ground in every community, and the connection brings so much to the campaign."

At this point, Roberts expects to reach Vancouver Sept. 1, 2017, and he will be journeying throughout the winter. From Northumberland, he is heading for London, Sarnia and Windsor, maximizing his time in Ontario. With its 13.5-million population, he explained, it's a significant population base.

"We want to talk to the municipal leaders, engage with the kids in the high schools," he said.

At a time when people hear so much whenever the police get something wrong, he said, his own story from 25 years ago is an example of how they got it right by intervening in his life in a big way.

It was the start of the rest of his story — addressing his addiction issues, returning to school, graduating on the dean's list.

"Twelve years later, I am on the cover of *Maclean's*," he said.

"There is potential in all of us."

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