



Capt. Stephanie Watkinson, left, with the Chatham-Kent Salvation Army receives a The Push For Change t-shirt from Joe Roberts, who is in the midst of a 9,000-kilometre walk across Canada to raise money and awareness for youth homelessness. Roberts stopped in Chatham, Ont. on Wednesday November 16, 2016 to participate in the Salvation Army's Red Kettle campaign kick-off. (Ellwood Shreve/Chatham Daily News)

Joe Roberts calls himself an example of “a community investment gone correct.”

After spending time on the streets of Vancouver as a homeless youth battling mental issues and addiction, he turned his life around thanks to agencies like the Salvation Army, food banks —and his mom.

“The Salvation Army and other frontline organizations like them where there to support me when I was on the street,” Roberts said.

When he was ready to make the move to get off the streets, he used the “last ace in my pocket” and called his mother and asked for help.

She brought him home and he met an OPP officer, which led to him ending up receiving treatment for his drug addiction.

“In less than 12 years I went from a guy struggling with mental health, chronic addiction and homelessness to being

a celebrated Canadian entrepreneur,” said Robert, who was previously involved in a content development company building websites and arranging e-commerce.

Now, he's giving back by raising money through the “push or change,” which is a 9,000-kilometre walk pushing a shopping cart, which began on May 1 from St. John's, Newfoundland and is slated to end on Sept. 30, 2017 in Vancouver, B.C. to raise money and awareness about the issue of youth homelessness. Details are available at www.thepushforchange.com.

Roberts stopped in Chatham on Wednesday to take part in the Kettle Campaign kick-off for the Chatham-Kent Salvation Army.

Having experienced help from the agency, he said, “I like to say: ‘When the world stops recognizing you that's when the Salvation Army does recognize you.’”

Youth homelessness can be invisible to many, Robert said, adding that at-risk youth can be those in such situations as being disengaged, living in precarious environments or have the inability to be at home because of family conflicts, or struggle with mental health issues such as addiction.

“It really is one of these tips of the iceberg,” Roberts said, adding when people see homelessness in a large metropolitan community, that is the tip of the iceberg.

“The bottom part of that iceberg exists in every community,” he said, adding places like Chatham are a feeder community to cities such as nearby London or Windsor.

Roberts said he is sure if a census was taken, there are just as many at-risk youth per capita in Chatham as there are in Toronto.

Although he has made it off the streets, it was self-reflection that caused him to take on his cross-country journey, pushing a shopping cart, which he did in his youth while living under a bridge.

Roberts said he hit his mid-40s and began to question “what kind of legacy do I want to leave?”

He added he wanted to do more than just run a business and make money.

“I wanted to have an impact.”

Roberts made a promise long ago if he got his life together he would do something to help others.

“This is my pay-it-forward, I suppose.”

Capt. Stephanie Watkinson, with the Chatham-Kent Salvation Army said it is important for success stories like Roberts' to be told “because it provides hope for people that when they're going through difficult times, things can change, things can get better.”

She added there are a lot of services in the community to help bring people out of whatever issue they are going through.

“We really want to educate people that we're more than just a food bank, we do offer a variety of different programs and supports to people on a daily basis,” Watkinson said.

She noted a lot of people who have been helped have followed Roberts' example and give back.

“We always tell clients that feel bad accepting the help that one day you'll be able to give back,” she said.

Watkinson noted some people are giving back by donating two hours of their time to do a Red Kettle shift.

“We do require many volunteers everyday once the kettles go out,” she said, adding those interested in doing a Kettle shift can go online cksalvationarmy.org for contact information.

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