



Joe Roberts, a former drug addict who once lived under a bridge in Vancouver, went on to become a CEO. He is pushing a shopping cart across Canada to bring awareness to youth homelessness. He will be at the Port Dover Community Centre on Thursday at 1:30 p.m. DANIEL R. PEARCE/SIMCOE REFORMER

Joe Roberts is pushing a shopping cart across Canada so young people don't end up in the situation he was in: homeless, addicted to drugs, and living under a bridge.

Roberts eventually overcame his problems, went to college, and became the CEO of his own multimedia company.

Now the 49-year-old has dedicated more than a year of his life to raising both awareness of youth homelessness and money for a national program to combat it.

"We're hoping to have a conversation with Canadians and talk about what we need to do to prevent situations like mine from happening," Roberts said Monday morning while pushing a shopping cart along Highway 3 between Cayuga and Jarvis.

The way to combat youth homelessness, he said, is to run a school-based program that can get to troubled kids before they end up on the streets.

Roberts called for “early detection” of teenagers with mental health and addictions problems to be followed up with prevention programs.

The money he brings in from his walk, called “the push for change,” will go towards a national program being developed by a number of organizations.

It will be a “highly-collaborative” taking in police, educators, children's aid societies, and mental health and addictions groups, he said.

“We don't want to invest in guys when they start pushing shopping carts,” he explained.

Roberts, who is followed by a van on his trek, started in Newfoundland six months ago and expects to finish in Vancouver at the end of next September.

More than 400 community events are planned along his route, including one Thursday afternoon at the Port Dover Community Centre where Roberts will share his story.

Roberts, who grew up in Midland, Ont., said he fell into trouble when he left home at age 15 to escape a bad family situation. By then he was already drinking and using drugs.

He ended up living on the streets in Vancouver, pushing a shopping cart and living under a bridge.

His mother rescued him and brought him back to Ontario where he continued to struggle.

The turning point came when Roberts got hold of a weapon and tried to take his own life.

He might have succeeded if not for the intervention of a Barrie, Ont., OPP officer who talked him down and took him to a hospital – the beginning of his recovery.

Roberts went to Loyalist College in Belleville, quickly excelled in the business world, and started his own company. He's been featured in Maclean's magazine as a successful entrepreneur and made the cover of Canadian Business.

He now works as a motivational speaker and has dedicated 16 months of his life to pushing the symbolic shopping cart across Canada.

Now is the time for the country to do something about youth homelessness, Roberts said.

“We are staring down the pipe of a long-term non-sustainable issue. It's only a matter of time before we look like America,” he said while taking a break in his daily 26-km walk.

On Monday, Roberts was escorted by a Haldimand OPP officer who drove a police SUV in front of him along Highway 3 as he headed towards Jarvis.

Const. Eric Enkelaar said he does liaison with Haldimand high schools and sees the problem of youth homelessness first hand.

High school students under age 18 have trouble getting social assistance and often “have nowhere to live,” he said.

Joe Roberts will be at the Port Dover Community Centre on Thurs., Nov. 10, 1:30 p.m. to speak about his youth homelessness initiative. Roberts, who is pushing a shopping cart across Canada, will head to Delhi and Tillsonburg on the weekend.

dpearce@postmedia.com