

Former addict fighting youth homelessness one step at a time

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When Joe Roberts was in his late teens, he was sleeping on a park bench in downtown Vancouver, pushing his belongings in a shopping cart and addicted to drugs.

With support from his mom and a retired OPP officer, Roberts changed his life and got a second chance. He kicked his drug habit, enrolled in college and in less than 12 years found himself on the cover of Canadian Business magazine for his company, Mindware Design.

But Roberts, 49, has never forgotten the feeling of living on the streets and selling his belongings for drugs.

Roberts launched The Push for Change campaign to raise awareness and funds to end youth homelessness. The campaign involves pushing a shopping cart 9,000 kilometres from St. John's, NL to Vancouver. He left on May 1, 2016 on a trip that's expected to take 517 days.

"I'm walking across Canada pushing a symbol of chronic example of homelessness — a shopping cart — to talk about what we need to do to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness," Roberts said. "As we go through the different communities, I'm overwhelmed by the support at all levels."

On Tuesday, Day 206 of his journey, area high school students and Kingsville Mayor Nelson Santos welcomed Roberts and his support vehicle to town.

"Homelessness may not be something that's visible but it's something that we recognize as a community as existing within our youth," Santos said. "To be able to get that message out and create an awareness is really important."

Roberts, who's married, believes it's possible to end youth homelessness by investing in three pillars: prevention, emergency services and housing first. He said the root causes for homelessness continue to be family conflict, addiction and mental health. Every year, 35,000 kids are homeless in this country.

"We misunderstand the issue and think the young person has made their bed let them lie in it," he said. "I think systemically when you see the numbers rise this isn't a rising moral issue. It's a breakdown in the system."

Roberts believes it's important to support and guide the youth while they're still in school. He said they need the



resources to handle mental health, the early childhood trauma and the family conflict so they can grow and realize their potential.

The Push for Change will raise awareness and funds by engaging in more than 400 school and community events. On Thursday, Roberts will be visiting the Salvation Army Windsor Community Rehabilitation Centre on Church Street.

Roberts walks close to 25 km a day, exhausting his body before heading out to do interviews and appearances each day. But despite exhaustion, he refuses to give up until he arrives in Vancouver in September.

“At the core of what we are doing is our passion,” he said. “You set your personal life aside and you continue to soldier on.”

Check out his progress at thepushforchange.com.

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Students at Kingsville high school line the street to greet Joe Roberts as he pushed a shopping cart into town on Nov. 22, 2016. Dan Janisse / Windsor Star



Joe Roberts pushes a shopping cart into the town of Kingsville on Nov. 22, 2016. Dan Janisse / Windsor Star



Kingsville Mayor Nelson Santos pushes Joe Roberts' cart into the town of Kingsville on Nov. 22, 2016. Dan Janisse / Windsor Star