

You can't choose the weather, just like you can't choose your childhood.

Joe Roberts was walloped with snow and chilly temps as he rolled his shopping cart into Oxford, bringing the Push for Change campaign to students at three local schools.

He looked cold, but quitting wasn't an option. Roberts is getting close to the halfway point of his 517 day trek across Canada, pushing a shopping cart, to raise awareness and funds for youth homelessness.

"My story is a story of what happens when things go right," he told a group of staff and students gathered at Ingersoll District Collegiate Institute on Monday afternoon.

He's now pushing the shopping cart as a symbol, coming full circle from Roberts' late teen years, when he was struggling with addiction, living on the street, and collecting empty bottles in a shopping cart.

Three days before Christmas in 1989 he called his mom for help. But his crisis came a short time after he moved home.

"I had got a hold of a pistol. I was very despondent and considered ending my life," he said. Roberts credits the OPP officer that showed up that night, Scott MacLeod, with saving his life – giving him the sliver of opportunity to forge a new path.

"He quickly identified a kid in crisis, versus a man who was a threat," Roberts said.

Shortly after, Roberts went to rehab, where he said one of his therapists convinced him to going back to school. He wrote MacLeod at one year sober, and again when he graduated from college.

Despite not thinking he was smart, Roberts earned a 3.94 GPA and later became the CEO of a communications company.

He encouraged any struggling students to dedicate themselves to their work, and especially any hobbies or passions, even if they're feeling unworthy.

"There's possibility, even in the darkest moments," he said, emphasizing action. "How do you snap a bad cycle? You get up and you do something. Go help somebody."

He said it was his street skills that set him apart in the business world.

"I spent 10 years of my life solving problems creatively, looking for shortcuts. In the tech industry that's called innovation," he said.

IDCI's leadership and English teacher Angela Matches said she appreciated Roberts' focus on building resiliency in young people – a goal for many teachers.

"Sometimes we misjudge and we think that people are doing OK, when really we have no idea what's behind their story," she said. "This is a really important reminder to us that there are people who very much need our help – people in our community."

Half the money Roberts raises stays local – he offered the Fusion Centre as an example – and the other half goes to a Push for Change national partners working to eradicate youth homelessness.

Grade 9 student Arianna Showler from St. Mary's said she was inspired by Roberts' goal to walk 9,000 kilometres across Canada after hearing him speak on Tuesday.

"It's ambitious," she said. "He changed his life around."

Serenity Henry, also in Grade 9, said she liked how Roberts used his own personal journey as the motivation to tackle a wider social issue.

"He based his entire project on his struggles in his life," she said.

After two days braving the winter weather in Oxford, Roberts deemed the county "absolutely fantastic."

"I walked about 23 kilometres into the city of Woodstock today, and was met in the corner by some very frantic and excited and exuberant young people," he said.

Roberts has also enjoyed time with a number of local police officers who have protected him on his morning kilometres and taken heart from his story.

"It's a good reminder about our need to make sure we engage with our youth, and support them in non-traditional policing manners so they get the help they need in times of crisis," said Tony Hymers, Oxford OPP detachment commander.

Over the past 18 months the Oxford OPP have instituted a CITO (Crisis Intervention Trained Officers) program. Each platoon has several officers with additional training to better approach those sensitive situations with youth.

Hymers said hearing about Roberts' connection with another officer MacLeod was "a good reminder why we do what we do."

Roberts left students at the Woodstock Community Complex with a message of encouragement.

"Inside each and every one of us is something extraordinary," he told the crowd.

"We can do absolutely incredible things when we have the courage to push for change."

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