

# Push for Change comes to city

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Just over 100 people joined the Skid Row CEO for a walk through **Brantford** to put a spotlight on youth homelessness.

"For most people it is an invisible problem," Joe Roberts said Sunday before leading a walk from the McDonald's on Stanley Street to the Sanderson Centre. "People don't see it and so they don't think about it.

"But being homeless - living out on the street - is a reality for 35,000 young Canadians - young people who don't have consistent and secure housing."

Roberts is in the middle of a cross-Canada trek to raise awareness of youth homelessness and brought his campaign - The Push For Change - to **Brantford** on Sunday. His local appearance began with a walk from Burford through West Brant to Stanley Street before embarking on another walk to the Sanderson Centre.

Wayne Branchaud, organizer of the local event, joined Roberts on the local leg of his journey.

The 9,000-kilometre Push For Change walk began in St. John's on May 1 and is expected to end in Vancouver on Sept. 30.

"We've walked 4,200 kilometres so far and I'm really pleased with the level of community engagement that we've seen so far," Roberts said. "That's what this walk is all about - community engagement.

"We want to get communities talking about youth homelessness. We want to start a conversation and get people

thinking about solutions."

Roberts pushes a shopping cart during his walk. The cart is a symbol of homelessness and a reminder of where he is now versus where he was years ago.

Now known as the Skid Row CEO, Roberts was a homeless heroin addict. He overcame his addiction and went on to become CEO and president of Mindware Designs Communications in Vancouver. He is now a motivational speaker and author.

"The thing people have to remember about youth homelessness is that every individual is different," Roberts said. "They have different stories to tell, different experiences and how they respond to people will be different.

"In my case it was my mother and an OPP officer who helped me turn my life around."

The Push For Change has received a lot of corporate support and Roberts said he is grateful for the support received from the Ontario Provincial Police.

"They've been great," he said. "They've been with us every step of the way throughout the province and will be with us right up until the time we leave Ontario."

In addition to raising awareness of youth homelessness, the cross-country trek aims to raise money for a charity co-founded by Roberts called Push For Change. In **Brantford**, half of what is raised locally will go to Push For Change with the other half going to Why Not City Missions.

Founded by Charlie and Sue Kopczyk in 2002, Why Not City Missions has helped local at-risk youth through a variety of programs. Representatives of Why Not City Missions as well as a number of young people supported by the organization participated in the walk, carrying cardboard donation boxes.

"Events like this are very important to us," said Becca McLellan, director of Why Not City Missions. "Youth homelessness is something we deal with every day and events like this increase community engagement.

"For many it's an invisible issue and this helps bring it into the open."

For Branchaud, who, along with his wife Deirdre, organized the **Brantford** event, Sunday began early. He was up in time to join Roberts on his walk from Burford to **Brantford** that began at 7 a.m.

"I figured if he's walking 9,000 kilometres, the least I can do is walk 20 kilometres from Burford to **Brantford**," Branchaud said. "It was a great walk because it gave us time to chat for a bit and get caught up.

"We also had a few people give us waves and a couple gave us donations of \$10 and \$20."

Push for Change also received a boost from Sherry Kerr, president of the Rotary Club of **Brantford**, and Justin Bester, president of Rotary Club of **Brantford** Sunrise, who also walked with Roberts.

Organizers are trying to raise \$100,000 locally with half of the money going to Push For Change and the other half to Why Not City Missions.

More than \$6,200 has been raised so far and the fund-raising initiative will continue until the end of December. To contribute to the effort visit

<http://bit.ly/2eucxZh>.

"If everyone in **Brantford** gave just \$1 we'd make our target and that's what I'm asking people to do," Branchaud said. "Our kids are our future and if we want to have a good future, we need to invest in our youth."

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