

Formerly homeless and now out to ‘change the system’

 lambtonshield.com/formerly-homeless-now-change-system/

By J.D. Booth

11/28/2016



The story of Joe Roberts' journey from being a homeless addict to a successful entrepreneur is a powerful one, but he's gone beyond just telling that story in settings where motivation is one of the key deliverables.

Now he heads the Push for Change as part of an initiative he hopes will create systemic change, first by bringing attention to the underlying conditions that lead to homelessness.

Roberts is now engaged in a cross-country walk, pushing a custom-built shopping cart some 9,000 kilometres in a trip that will take him from St. John's to Vancouver, finishing at the end of September 2017.

On Monday, December 5, he will be speaking to a crowd at Lambton College as he marks day 218 out of 517 on his journey.

All are invited to attend.

Lambton Shield caught up with Roberts by phone recently as he continued his 24 kilometre daily trek through Southwest Ontario, making steady progress on his monumental journey.

As Roberts explained, he and a colleague came up with the idea of heading to the road after realizing that all the motivational speaking about the condition of homelessness simply wasn't enough.

"I wanted to change the way people think about homelessness," he said. "The idea of changing the entire country, engaging Canadians was the goal we started talking about and we realized that the way you do that in Canada is by walking across the country."

Looking at iconic people like Terry Fox and Rick Hansen, Roberts began the idea for the Push for Change initiative.

There was a lot of work involved in the planning and Roberts will be the first to acknowledge that he has a great support team behind every step he takes, pushing the shopping cart, an iconic symbol of homelessness.

He's also discovering that changing the system in which homelessness still exists is a process not an event.

"But it is possible," says Roberts. "Raising money and raising awareness is a way to engage all Canadians in the conversation about what we need to do to prevent, reduce and remove homelessness."

First among those priorities, he says, is to prevent homelessness.

"Canada is behind in prevention models," he says. "We, like most of the developed world, invest in crisis. If there's a fire, we react but the problem with that is that homelessness isn't a random event. It's a systemic problem, so you need to look at it from that perspective."

Roberts uses the "broken pipe" analogy to make his point.

"If your home was flooded, you wouldn't spend the next six months mopping up water. You'd find the leak, shut off the water and repair and clean up," he adds.

In the case of homelessness, Roberts says society needs to employ a strategy of prevention through education.

"We know where people are before they become homeless," he says. "It's a school."

Taking the next step is key.

"We need to get kids the resources they need. We need to call out youth homelessness for what it is, something that's happening to kids. They're not bad kids," says Roberts.

Roberts credits the involvement of leadership in UA Local 663 for being early supporters of the Push for Change initiative.

"I'm very much looking forward to engaging those folks from Sarnia," he said.

The event takes place on December 5 at 1 p.m. in room N105 of Lambton College. More information on the Push for Change initiative can be found online at www.thepushforchange.com.