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 ifpress.com/2016/12/11/joe-roberts-brings-shopping-cart-to-london-area-to-push-for-change-to-youth-homelessness

Joe Roberts doesn't remember all his nights and days under bridges and on the streets of Vancouver. But he recalls vividly stopping into a variety store one blustery winter evening. "I bought some pepperettes and cheese and that was my Christmas dinner."

In the clerk's pitying gaze, Roberts said he saw what he had lost. "I remembered being home and being around family. The hardest thing about being on the street is that you're always on the outside looking in."

Almost halfway through a 9,000-kilometre journey across Canada to promote full-circle housing for homeless youth in Canada, Roberts was in London on the weekend.

He spent time offering encouragement, support and a listening ear to residents at Quinton Warner house, a men's addictions rehab centre operated by Mission Services of London.

Roberts' years of homelessness and addiction — and ultimately the second chance that led to his becoming head of a multimillion-dollar tech company — have led him to push a shopping cart five to six hours a day.

The self-described skid-row-to-CEO advocates for better mental-health, addiction and trauma supports to prevent homelessness, and a housing-first policy.

"People are hungry to hear and understand what long-term, sustainable solutions look like, as opposed to rhetoric," Roberts said.

"As much as homelessness may appear to be daunting and complex, the issue is not complex. Complex is putting a Rover on Mars."

By drawing together the collective energy and will of everyone, each community can unplug the logjam that keeps emergency shelters full rather than moving people into safe, affordable and supported housing, Roberts said.

The Housing First model in use in Medicine Hat, Alta, — where officials have collaborated on supported housing to eliminate chronic homelessness — is well worth emulating across the country, he said.

It's less costly than the burden on policing, health care and mental health care, Roberts said. And the businessperson in him says it makes sense economically, too, because housing will stimulate the economy.

"What has been reaffirmed is how people will support things if they better understand it," he said during the London stop. "When we better understand something we get rid of the stigma."

There are moments, Roberts said, when his walk is discouraging. "But I'm playing the long game. You do the walk and you advocate for years to come."

He is walking from east to west, a planned 517-day walk with a winding side-trip through Southwestern Ontario cities. His schedule will take him to Barrie on Christmas Day.

That's where his family lives, the city where his mother urged him to come home after his years of addiction and living under bridges in Vancouver as a teenager and young man.

"It's easy to be discouraged," Roberts said of his message to homeless people he meets along the way, "but inside each and every one of us is something beautiful, something divine... There's always something to look forward to."

For more information on the journey and the cause, go to thepushforchange.com

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