

The Petrolia Topic

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Joe Roberts began his walk across Canada in support of ending youth homelessness this past May on the East Coast. He pushed through Hawkesbury on September 22nd with support of locals and Walter Gretzky. The 9000 km journey will take 517 days with many stops along the way, including Petrolia on Dec. 3. Submitted photo.

Joe Roberts is in the midst of a 517 day, 9000 kilometre journey across Canada. Right now, you can find him in Southwestern Ontario, pushing a shopping cart to represent chronic homelessness and following in the footsteps of Canadian heroes like Terry Fox and Rick Hansen.

Also known as the “Skidrow CEO”, Roberts was once a homeless youth battling drug addiction. Now, after getting clean and attending school in Belleville, he’s a motivational speaker, author and Executive Director of The Push For Change, proving that no matter what life throws at you, there’s always a chance to turn things around.

Roberts will be walking through Petrolia on December 3, joining the town’s Christmas parade and speaking afterwards at the library at 3 o’clock. He said that when it comes to youth homelessness, it can and does exist in rural areas, but may not be in plain sight.

“I think one of the things that is a bit of a misnomer is that if you don’t see it there’s a notion that it doesn’t exist,”

Roberts said. "And it very much does exist in communities like Petrolia and all kinds of small communities across Canada."

Roberts said that studies show the root causes of youth homelessness stem from family conflict, mental health issues, addiction and childhood trauma and abuse. Roberts, who was born in Midland, Ontario, said he flunked out of three high schools in Barrie, Ontario, and not once did the school call to see what was going on in his life that may be causing this.

"Every single young person who has ever been on the street was first sitting in a classroom," he said. "We don't want to wait until that young person is sitting on a piece of cardboard in front of a liquor store in Windsor. We want to support them when they're in a high school in Petrolia."

To prevent youth homelessness, Roberts said there need to be systems in place to help keep those young people in their community where they have that family support.

"What ends up happening in a community like Petrolia, and I know this, because it's my story...I was from a small town, had challenges, left home at 15," he said. "I was invisible, couch surfed, lived in unsafe environments until I moved out of the community into a big city."

Roberts said if you take the average 15 year old and put them in London or Windsor, he can predict what the future holds for them with pretty close accuracy. He said it's important to get the message out in rural communities and to discuss youth at risk and to create safety measures. Those kids in rural areas often leave their hometowns for larger urban centres like Roberts, who went to Vancouver.

"Give them resources they need to transition through those hard times in their teenage years," he said. "If we don't, what we see is the exodus from small communities into the larger communities where you actually then do see homelessness."

In crossing Canada so far, Roberts said he's had an incredible experience. The idea to take the journey was inspired by other Canadians who have done the same. In doing this he hopes to engage the public, the media and politicians.

"Canadians have a way of rising up and meeting you, so when we were looking at engaging the country, we looked at models that work, and this seemed to work," Roberts said. "It's been fantastic...we've got passersby slowing down and giving us 20 dollar bills."

Roberts said the Push for Change campaign started off small and as a grassroots movement in Atlantic Canada, but

since arriving in Ontario and passing through Toronto, there has been a huge surge in support. Roberts said that's what keeps him inspired, but there's also a number of faces along the way that have kept him going too.

Going into youth shelters and centres has given Roberts the opportunity to speak one-on-one with kids, sharing the message that they are more than their past. During a visit to Montreal, Roberts came across an 18 year old who spent the day with him, telling his story.

"There was a young man named Max," Roberts said. "He came up and said I want to walk with you. I thought he meant in Montreal, but he said 'no, I want to walk across Canada with you'."

Roberts said the trek can be tough some days, both physically and emotionally. He and his wife have 18 hour days with no real time for themselves, and it will continue for next 11 months, until they end up in their final destination of Vancouver.

"When I get worn really thin like that, I remember why I'm doing it, it's for kids like Max," Roberts said. "It's not just my story, it's the story of 35,000 young people in this country every year."

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