

Sarnia and Lambton County This Week

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Joe Roberts (third from the right) and his Push For Change team joined Lambton College President Judith Morris (far right), staff and students at an event at Lambton College on Monday, Nov. 5. Roberts is pushing a shopping cart across Canada to raise awareness about youth homelessness. CARL HNATYSHYN/SARNIA THIS WEEK

As a young boy growing up in the small community of Midland, Ontario in the 1970s, Joe Roberts seemed to have it all: a supportive, loving family, a wonderful home and record of real achievement at school.

Roberts had many friends at his elementary school, his family lived in a comfortably middle-class section of town and he had a dad who encouraged him, loved him and always pushed him to be the best he could be.

“I remember sitting in school, looking at the clock, just waiting impatiently for it to get to 3:20, not because I didn't like school, but because I couldn't wait to get home to be with my family,” he said.

Out of the blue, though, Roberts' seemingly idyllic world came crashing down to the ground when he was eight years old. His family got a knock on the door one day. Police informed his homemaker mother that Roberts' beloved father had died of a heart attack at the age of 35.

Apart from the staggering emotional impact of losing his biggest champion at the age of eight, Roberts, his mother and his two siblings were also faced with another unexpected complication – they had no insurance and no source of income.

“My family had no insurance. We went from middle class to poverty in one day,” he said. “We went from safe, fun and secure to fear, poverty and anxiety.”

With three children to feed and an urgent need for financial security, Roberts' mother remarried remarkably quickly to a man who was the polar opposite of Roberts' biological father.

“The next guy wasn't like my dad at all. He was a violent, abusive alcoholic...who told me 'you're stupid, you're dumb and you'll never amount to anything',” he said. “At the time I didn't know how to deal with it. I had a compromised sense of self-worth.”

“My entire world was different,” he continued. “When the clock hit 3:20, I didn't want to go home anymore.”

At the age of ten, Roberts began experimenting with drugs as a way to make his new, horrific life a little bit more bearable. At 15, angry and rebellious, he dropped out of school and left home, sleeping on couches, sleeping on the floor, wherever he could find shelter. By the age of 18, he was a heroin addict pushing a shopping cart in East Vancouver, living underneath a viaduct, with no hope for the future.

“Addiction was a way to cope with my fear,” he said. “It served a purpose, to protect me emotionally...because the authority figures in my life had all let me down.”

His story would have likely ended there, Roberts said, if not for the efforts of his mother, who flew out from Barrie to Vancouver to bring him back home, and an OPP officer named Scott MacLeod, who talked him out of an attempted suicide at his mother's home and made Roberts get the help that he needed afterwards to turn his life completely around.

Joe Roberts, now 50, a Loyalist College graduate, an Ontario Premier's Award recipient and a nationally-recognized, successful entrepreneur, was on-hand at Lambton College on Monday, Dec. 5 to share his story with approximately 100 students as part of his cross-country, youth empowerment campaign, The Push for Change.

Roberts is pushing a shopping cart from Newfoundland to British Columbia with the aim of raising awareness about and money for the issue of youth homelessness, while calling for action by municipal, provincial and federal governments to set up a strategy to bring an end to youth homelessness in Canada.

According to a 2014 report by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness/Homeless Hub and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, over 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness annually with over 35,000 of that group made up of youth aged 13 to 24. It's an acute problem that is only going to get worse if governments at all levels don't address it, Roberts said. Prevention is a big part of solving that problem, he said.

"It's really identification and crisis intervention," he said. "So we know that every young person who has dealt with mental health or family conflict, family violence, trauma or addiction, we can identify them before that crisis hits. What we have to do is rally around them and get them the support and services they need before they end up sitting on a piece of cardboard in front of the liquor store. We know how to do that, all we have to do is gather the data and implement long-term, sustainable solutions across the country."

"We can't do one-off programs, we have to do the research, gather the data, then come back to our policymakers and provide them with a blueprint that the feds can roll out across the country," Roberts continued. "What we haven't done is do that research and gather that information and that's what we're funding. If we do that, we will see a dramatic reduction on the strain on the emergency services sector. If we don't, the emergency services sector will continue to buckle at the knees because numbers will continue to rise."

Pragmatic policymakers would be wise to invest in preventative strategies for youth homelessness, Roberts said, as it is simply a wise and money-saving investment.

"We tend to follow and invest in crisis. We're good at putting out fires, but we're not good at preventing them. And we need to prevent them, because preventing something is a lot less expensive and a lot less costly on society," he said. "You work inside school systems, you build host home programs so that a young person has a safe place to be – you don't simply build a housing strategy junior for young people. You have to take a look at the nuances, you have to create housing-first initiatives so that people aren't stuck in the cycle of poverty and homelessness for years."

In the first 217 days of his 517 day, 9,000 kilometer journey across Canada (Roberts joked that he had already gone through ten pairs of shoes), Roberts said that he has been encouraged by the great response his message had been receiving.

"One of the things we find that's common across the country is that once you get the opportunity to engage like we did here today at Lambton College, people will support you," he said. "Sometimes you have to do a little bit of evangelism to get them to understand why you're pushing a shopping cart across Canada but when they get that it's a symbol of homelessness and you're trying to support and keep kids safe, they get it."

"Folks around this city have rallied," he continued. "People say we inspire them, well, they inspire us by keeping the fire burning and continue not just to support the Push For Change, but also support initiatives here in the city of Sarnia to protect young people – things like the Hub and Rebound. These are organizations that will be here long after we leave and they will be the front-line for young people experiencing trouble."

Asked whether the general public were aware of how prevalent youth homelessness truly was – Roberts said that it is largely an 'invisible' plight, with youth often couch-surfing and keeping hidden from view – he said that awareness had improved greatly over the past decade.

“I think we're coming to a rolling boil. Ten years ago, this is a conversation we couldn't have had with our government. We're having a conversation now,” he said, noting that he has met with Premier Wynne and has booked a meeting with Prime Minister Trudeau. “At the federal level, the Prime Minister put together a cabinet last year to look specifically at a national housing strategy. We've got organizations like A Way Home, which is a newly formed national coalition for the prevention of youth homelessness.”

“We're at a place where we feel we're at a tipping point. So having events like this at Lambton and continue to push the envelope forward,” Roberts added. “On top of that, having a conversation with these young people, who are studying things like police foundations and social work, who are about to enter a career where they will end up having a big impact, it's just great.”

Roberts' call to action resonated with many in the audience, including Michelle Shelswell, professor at the college's child and youth care program and project manager at Rebound Sarnia-Lambton's the Hub Project – a drop-in centre for transitional aged youth supported by 21 local service organizations set to open its doors in a few months time. Shelswell said that youth homelessness is a serious problem in Sarnia-Lambton, a problem that many in the region are unaware of.

“It's way more prevalent than most people are aware of,” she said. “The homeless youth in our community – some do sleep on the streets, but more often what we're seeing is couch surfing, putting themselves in horrible situations that they shouldn't be in – it's quite common. We also have youth that just need a couple of different ways to cope or how to figure out what services they may need.”

The Hub Project will offer youth in crisis a number of options that will help alleviate some of the pressures that they're facing, Shelswell said.

“We want to work with youth who are not in a crisis to get those preventative measures in place. But we know we're going to get youth coming in who are experiencing crisis and we have a number of crisis partners available so we can provide help with that,” she said.

After Roberts listened to the story of Lambton College child and youth worker program graduate Megan Nahmabin, a young woman who struggled with homelessness, a result of her mother's ultimately fatal addiction to fentanyl patches, he said that he was honoured to be able to be exposed to stories like Nahmabin's throughout his cross-Canada trek. It's stories like Nahmabin's that underline just how possible it is for people to find strength and determination in order to change their circumstances even under the most unbearable of situations, he said.

“Well, it's stories like Megan's that continue to move my body forward when I'm aching and sore,” he said. “It's a sadly common thing. The stories that we hear, though, are often ones that are positive. I was there and I'm here now, which is excellent. But it's the stories we don't here, of people who are still there and who haven't transitioned out, those are the stories we also need to be concerned about.”

“Today in this room I had five or six people come up and share their personal experience. And what wonderful stories they were. But what about the people in Sarnia-Lambton who are still struggling? To them I want to say that there's a possibility in you and I want you to continue to fight for your right to transform,” Roberts continued. “ I had the right people in my corner. I look at my story and my story worked because I had those right people. And The Push for Change is really about creating those systems and structures in place so that everyone can reach their potential. That's what I want to accomplish out of all of this.”

For more information about The Push For Change, visit www.thepushforchange.com. For more information about Rebound Sarnia-Lambton and the Hub, visit www.reboundonline.com.