

Push for Change rolls through Sarnia

theobserver.ca/2016/12/04/joe-roberts-is-pushing-a-shopping-cart-across-canada-to-help-end-youth-homelessness



Joe Roberts with Push for Change, in blue, walks north on Indian Road Saturday in Sarnia, surrounded by members of United Association Local 663 - including Bob Sauve in yellow and Ross Tius, beside Sauve, in black. Roberts is trying to raise funds and awareness to help end youth homelessness in Canada. (Handout)

A former homeless drug addict turned successful businessman, Joe Roberts journeyed through Sarnia this weekend as part of his shopping-cart-pushing trek across Canada to end youth homelessness.

The 50-year-old Barrie resident –who said he’s moving to Vancouver when the 9,000-kilometre, 517-day journey comes to its expected close there next September – walked up Plank Road Saturday as he entered Sarnia flanked by pipefitters and plumbers from United Association Local 663.

“Fantastic,” Roberts said about the walk from Petrolia to the Confederation Street union hall. “Community engagement is high and that’s really what we’re trying to do across this country.”

Roberts, who was homeless and addicted to drugs on the streets of Vancouver in the 1980s, got a second chance from his mom and a police officer, and went back to school and became successful, is raising awareness and cash via the Push for Change to help prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness.

So far, since starting in Newfoundland in May, the walk has raised about \$270,000 of its \$17.5-million goal, he said – with proceeds supporting local youth homelessness prevention programs in the communities he visits, as well as Raising the Roof’s Upstream Project that’s designed to prevent homelessness by reaching kids in school.

An estimated 235,000 people in Canada experience homelessness per year, and one-fifth are 16-24-year olds, according to raisingtheroof.org

“There’s another kind of currency that you don’t want to undervalue and that’s the currency of awareness,” Roberts said.

Everywhere he travels, he said, he meets municipal leaders, educators, students, and organized-labour leaders. Recently he met with federal and provincial government representatives.

“We’ve had an opportunity to bring different people to this issue and raise the awareness,” he said.

“But it takes a long time to create change.”

Roberts, while in Sarnia was also set to walk 25 kilometres through the city Sunday, participate in the Petrolia Santa Claus Parade, and attend an event at Lambton College.

He received about \$20,000 alone from the UA local, officials said.

His shopping cart, a modified baby carriage and a symbol of chronic homelessness in urban centres, is usually empty except for intangibles like hope, Roberts said

Heading into the coldest months of the year, he said he’s geared up and ready.

“The reality is, if you’re homeless, you don’t get to pick your weather and you don’t get to pick your seasons,” he said. “Poverty and homelessness, they exist as much in January and February as they do in May and June.”

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