



Push for Change co-founder Sean Richardson, campaign director Marie Roberts, and co-founder Joe Roberts (left to right) lead a crowd on one portion of the cross-Canada walk. Joe Roberts is travelling more than 9,000 km across Canada pushing a shopping cart to raise awareness about youth homelessness. (Submitted)

When Canadians want to draw attention to a cause, they walk across the country.

But no one's ever pushed a shopping cart.

That's what one of Joe Roberts' friends told him as he mused about a way to raise support and awareness for youth homelessness – and more importantly, ways to prevent it.

"There's an opportunity to break the barriers down and understand what youth homelessness is," he said. "It's family conflict, it's mental health, it's addiction, it's early childhood trauma."

Roberts doesn't just talk the talk. He walks the walk.

The 50-year-old became intimately familiar with youth homelessness when he was a teen, sleeping on the streets of Vancouver and struggling with addiction.

"Youth at risk exist in every community across this country," Roberts said. "I dropped out of school when I was 15. You didn't see me sitting in front of the liquor store begging for change, or huddled under a blue tarp under a local bridge, but I was homeless."

And now he's walking more than 9,000 kilometres across the country, a journey that he started in St. Johns, Nfld. on May 1. On Dec. 12, Roberts will arrive in Ingersoll, and he'll make his way to Woodstock the following day.

"Probably our favourite place to be is in the schools, where we actually have direct contact with young people. We get to explain what Push for Change is, and how easily homelessness can happen," he said. "It helps us get rid of stigma."

Roberts will speak to students at Ingersoll District Collegiate Institute when he comes to Oxford County. He will also

do a presentation at the Woodstock Community Complex on Dec. 13.

Asked what he might say to youth at risk, Roberts said it's important for vulnerable teens to remember their "extraordinariness," even in times they feel unworthy.

"We are not the things that have been said to us, the things that have been done to us," he added. "Even if you don't believe you can succeed, do it anyway."

But Roberts also knows that it takes more than inspiring words. The Push for Change team is dedicated to preventing youth homelessness in the first place.

"We can educate them and plant some seeds so they can identify and see it around them," he said. "I firmly believe this is solvable."

Roberts and his team see Push for Change, and the cross-Canada journey, as a way to "raise the volume of the conversation" around youth homelessness.

"Any social change happens at an awareness level first. It has to begin there before you get systemic change."

That's what drives Roberts on the cold mornings when his alarm goes off at 5 a.m. and he prepares for yet another day travelling 24 km on his own two feet.

"I choose to do this because it fulfils me," he said.

"As exhausting as it is, I cling to the possibility that the work we do today will change the face of youth homelessness in this country."

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