

Emotional homecoming for 'Barrie boy' and his Push for Change

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Joe Roberts' arrival at Zehrs in Barrie's south end closed a circle for the youth homelessness crusader.

"There's a lot of emotion coming into this parking lot," Roberts told a cheering crowd. "I used to train around here."

The stop in Barrie marks day 241 of Roberts' cross-Canada trek pushing a shopping cart to raise awareness and funds to end youth homelessness.

The once homeless drug addict turned successful businessman speaks from painful experience.

"Barrie is a city that I ran away from when I was kid and today I walked back and it's just really good to be back," said Roberts, his face red from walking the last ten kilometres into an icy wind.

Roberts ran away from his 'good, middle-class home' when he was 15 and pushed his own shopping cart around Vancouver's Downtown East Side.

Back in Barrie he tried to take his own life but was saved by OPP officer Scott McLeod.

That pivotal moment was when Roberts vowed to try to keep homelessness from happening to other young people.

"At the core, the push for change is for the underdog. For those kids out that feel different and awkward for whatever reason they end of homeless."

"Welcome home," said Barrie Mayor Jeff Lehman who was first to greet Roberts and later pushed a shopping cart along Yonge Street with Roberts.

"We're really proud to have you home, " said Lehman. "We have claim to Joe. He's Barrie's own in some ways."

The Mayor praised Roberts and his Barrie-born wife Marie for putting together something that Barrie is proud of and puts the city on the national stage.

Marie Roberts is the campaign director and said some highlights so far include their invitations to Parliament Hill and the Ontario Legislature where statements were read endorsing the Push For Change.

"Just the fact that federal, provincial and municipal governments have come behind us is a real blessing," she said.

Barrie Police Chief Kimberley Greenwood and OPP Deputy Commissioner Rick Barnum were among the crowd that joined Roberts for the walk to the South Shore Centre for a speaking engagement.

The OPP's now retired McLeod was on hand, proudly watching with his daughter.

"The unfortunate thing is that not everyone who needs a Scotty, meets a Scotty," said Roberts. "Not everybody has that champion or has the mom like mine. Each year in this country, 235,000 people experience homelessness, and 25 per cent of those are youth."

The executive director of Youth Haven Nathan Sykes also joined the event but says things in Barrie 'are not great' when it comes to youth homelessness.

Youth Haven has 19 emergency beds and five transitional beds.

"We could probably use 25 of those long term beds, easily," said Sykes. "Youth Haven is constantly at capacity and we often have a waiting list. The need really has exceeded the capacity and there are a lot of young people that couch surf as well so there's a lot of hidden homelessness."

Roberts began his 9,000-kilometre journey in May 1, 2016 in St. John's, N.L. and will end 517 days later in Vancouver B.C., on Sept. 30, 2017.

"The Push for Change was really my promise to pay it forward. On a street corner in 1989 I made a promise that if I ever got off the street I would do something to pay it forward."

Roberts says he borrowed the idea from an existing template in Canada to start national conversations.

"Going across the country seems to be something we do. It's kind of Canadian," said Roberts. "The shopping cart represents that chronic homelessness, the thing we're trying to avoid for kids and it's also a throw to my story."