

Push for Change anti-homelessness tour makes stop in Cambridge

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The Push For Change

Lisa Rutledge, Times Staff

Local students Sarah Gomes and Daniel Dombrovsky were among the hundreds of students on hand to greet social activist Joe Roberts who brought his The Push For Change tour to Cambridge.

[next play/pause pre 1/3](#)

CAMBRIDGE – It may not be surprising to hear that homelessness is a reality for many youths in Canada, but it might be shocking to learn which ones end up on the streets.

The truth is that the homeless youth of tomorrow could be a teen sitting inches away today.

This is was the alarming dose of reality shared by anti-homelessness activist Joe Roberts in a passion-driven message to local Catholic students gathered at St. Benedict Catholic Secondary School on Friday (Dec. 16).

And Roberts should know. He's been there.

The 50-year-old is today recognized for his commitment to ending youth homelessness as part of his cross-country The Push For Change walking tour and for his success as one of the country's most game-changing entrepreneurs.

But at the age of 15 however, Roberts was homeless. Emotionally succumbing to family conflict and his stepfather's cutting words, he dropped out of school, fell into a life of crime and drugs, and spent years living on the streets, pushing a shopping cart in east Vancouver.

Roberts was one of the lucky ones though, crossing paths with a few people who saw past his broken exterior to see his possibilities.

He was able to access the addictions help he needed, went back to school and went on to build a highly successful multimedia company, making his first million dollars at age 35. He told his story in a book, *Skid Row CEO*.

Those key people saved his life, Roberts told students, because they reminded him there was more to him than a homeless drug addict with "dirty nails" and "broken teeth".

In his address to the hundreds of Catholic students Friday, Roberts used his own life story to paint the realities of youth homelessness, and the common reasons youths end up there.

For him, it was trouble at home.

"I am one of those statistics," explained Roberts. "I was one of 67 per of young people who experience homeless due to family conflict."



But the drivers behind youth homelessness can include issues such as feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, social influences, addictions and mental health issues.

Roberts said when he looks back, he now realizes he let the criticisms and opinions of others define him, and then break him.

“From a really young age, I got the feeling that I wasn’t worth it,” he told students.

What’s especially important to know, he said, is that even good students from good families can end up leaving home, “couch surfing” in homes that will take them in, oftentimes opening the door to unsavoury life choices.

To help students understand the impact of that reality, Roberts challenged students to look to their left and to their right at the youths seated next to them.

“Now imagine that person beside you not having a place to go at the end of the day.”

Establishing this personal connection to youth homelessness has been a mission for Roberts, who is trekking across Canada pushing a modified shopping cart to raise funds and awareness.

His stop in Cambridge Friday marked day 230 on a 517-day journey that began May 1 in St. John’s, NL and will end up in Vancouver, B.C. in September.

So far, The Push for Change tour has raised \$300,000 for charities that tackle youth homelessness. Locally, Cambridge Catholic students, who escorted Roberts as he pushed his symbolic shopping cart to St. Benedict high school, raised thousands of dollars for the cause.

For Roberts, however, the real benefit of the tour can’t be valued in coin currency. He hopes newly raised awareness will empower young generations to make a difference within their own peer group, but also keep at-risk youths from heading down a path towards homelessness by never doubting their own potential.

“Inside each and every one of these students in this auditorium today is an unlimited, untapped possibility of potential,” he said. “I want them leaving here believing and internalizing and personalizing that idea that they could do anything with their lives.”

The entrepreneur turned social activist is hopeful his powerful messages and personal story will have the same lasting impact on students as his hero Terry Fox, who set out to cross Canada to raise money for cancer research.

For Saint Teresa of Calcutta Catholic Elementary School students Sarah Gomes and Daniel Dombrovsky, Roberts’ visit was a moment of pride. As members of their school’s social and justice committee, they helped raised \$500 for The Push for Change. Both said Roberts’ visit was a chance to make a local effort to help solve a global problem.

“It’s nice that we can be part of change,” said Gomes.