

Skid row to CEO: Joe Roberts shares his story with Guelph students

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Joe Roberts paces the small stage at St. James Catholic High School, recounting the lowest point of his life to hundreds of Guelph students.

The 50-year-old has spent the last half-a-year walking from St. John's, N.L. to Guelph in an effort to raise awareness about youth homelessness. He's only spending a couple of days in Guelph before continuing west, aiming to hit Vancouver by fall next year.

If you've seen him on the road, you've likely noticed he's pushing a shopping cart. The empty cart – built on the base of a Chariot stroller – has been travelling with him as a symbol of chronic homelessness.

Standing in front of students at St. James, he recalled back to the late 1980s, when he was a homeless drug addict, living under a bridge in Vancouver. His mother eventually brought him back to Barrie, Ont. but he still continued to struggle with addiction and a mental illness.

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One night, his mother found him sitting in his room with a 9mm pistol and she called the police. Roberts said this was the lowest point in his life.

'I went from skid row to CEO'

When an officer arrived, he diffused the situation and instead of arresting Roberts, the officer gave him a chance to turn his life around.

"He quickly assessed the situation and instead of seeing a man who was a threat, he saw a boy who was in a crisis," Roberts said.

From that point on, Roberts made great strides to turn his life around. He went into drug treatment, went back to college and went on to become the CEO of a successful multimedia company.

"You may never know the impact that you can have on another human being. Sometimes it's life altering," he said, expressing gratitude towards the officer that gave him that second chance. "In less than 12 years I went from skid row to CEO."

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But this new found fortune and fame left him feeling unfulfilled, he said.

"I hope that each and every one of you can meet with absolute fabulous success and make all the money you can make so that you can realize that it's absolutely worthless, that it doesn't mean anything."

When he reached the age of 45, he began to actively search for something that would bring him the fulfillment he was looking for. It was at this point when he decided to walk across the country, speaking to as many people as possible, to raise awareness and money to help end youth homelessness.

Push for Change

Roberts' campaign is called The Push for Change. He plans to stick around Guelph until Friday. After that, he'll continue on his way towards Orangeville.

He'll be speaking to Guelph and Erin students throughout the day on Wednesday. On Thursday, between 5 and 8 p.m., Roberts will be at Market Square, where residents can join him for a skate.

For more information, or to follow him on his campaign, visit thepushforchange.com