

Man pushing a cart across the country: "Be a gift to the world."

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Rob O'Flanagan



Joe Roberts speaks to Bishop Macdonell students on Wednesday afternoon. He is walking across Canada to prevent youth homelessness. Rob O'Flanagan/GuelphToday

Joe Roberts looks like a man who has walked a long, difficult road. And he has. Upon reaching Bishop Macdonell Catholic High School in Guelph on Wednesday, he had walked over 4,000 kilometres across the country. He's got another 4,000 to go.

But while his Push for Change trek to raise awareness of youth homelessness may be a tough slog, Roberts had a much tougher time surviving the journey of youth.

He told hundreds of students at the school on Wednesday that the sudden death of his much loved father when he was eight-years-old put in motion circumstances that were beyond his control. Those circumstances nearly ended his life by the time he was a teenager.

Roberts, 50, began walking from Newfoundland in the spring, pushing a shopping cart, the quintessential symptom of homelessness, in an effort to prevent young people from ending up like he did.

At the age of nine, he told the students, he started experimenting with drugs, all in an effort to gain approval and fit in with his younger brother's crowd.

Raised in a good, church-going, middle class family, Roberts couldn't wait for the school bell to chime at 3:20 p.m., so he could hustle home and spend time with his family, especially his dad.

After his father died, Roberts' mother was left with three young children and no financial support. She remarried hastily, to an abusive man.

Young Joe went from having an encouraging, kind father who told him he could be anything he wanted to be, to having a bullying stepfather who called him stupid and dumb. That's when his life began to spiral downward.

At the age of 15, he was kicked out of his home in Barrie. By that time his life was one of despair and hopelessness, he told his riveted audience. Homeless in his hometown, he made his way to Vancouver. Before long he was pushing a shopping cart filled with his meager possessions and living under a bridge.

But anything can happen in life, he told his listeners, if you have someone special in your corner, someone who supports you, no matter what.

For him that was his mother, who never gave up on him. At his lowest point, she rescued him, and brought him home to Ontario. Still struggling and suicidal, an Ontario Provincial Police cop named Scott MacLeod entered his life, and helped save it.

Roberts got treatment for drug addiction, went on to college for business, and turned his life around. He discovered that he was actually smart, not dumb. He ended up becoming a successful businessman.

Push for Change, he said, is his way of paying it forward, of giving back and helping others, the way he was helped.

"My hope for you is that go out in the world and become really wealthy and successful," he said, "so you can realize how utterly empty it is."

Success in life, he said, is about the people in your life, and the love between you. The time you spend with people is the best of times.

He urged the students to do whatever they can do "to be a gift of life to the world."

"That is when you really shine," he said. "That is when you're at your best."

Roberts made a number of presentations at Guelph and area schools this week. He will walk on to his hometown of Barrie in the coming days. He is scheduled to make it to Vancouver, where he lives, by next September.

Learn more about the walk and the campaign at www.thepushforchange.com.