

Man pushing shopping cart across Canada

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Rob O'Flanagan



A motivational speaker and successful business person, Joe Roberts began walking across the country in May to raise awareness of youth homeless in Canada. Supplied photo

Early next week, Joe Roberts, widely known at the “Skidrow CEO,” will arrive in Guelph pushing a shopping cart.

As a teenager, Roberts, now 50, ended up homeless on the streets of Vancouver. His teenage years growing up in Barrie were tough ones. He hit the road, hit the drugs, and hit the streets, spending dangerous years homeless on the west coast.

He turned his life around, became a successful businessperson, and motivational speaker. Now, he is a long-distance walker.

Roberts has been hitting the road all the way from Newfoundland, making a cross-country trek while pushing a shopping cart – a defining symbol of chronic homelessness. He wants to rattle the country into awareness and help end youth homelessness.

Irene Carroll, a publicist for The Push for Change, said Roberts is walking 24 kilometres a day, all of those with the cart. She said the man’s attitude is that a homeless person pushing a shopping cart faces all kinds of nasty weather and has no choice but to keep pushing. He is doing the same.

Learn more about the campaign at www.thepushforchange.com. Roberts will arrive in Guelph on Tuesday, Dec. 20, on about Day 235 of his epic journey.

Roberts' story had a positive outcome, although the same can't be said for a great many homeless young people in this country. He went from living under a bridge in the late-80s, to being the president and CEO of Mindware Design Communications, a successful multimedia company.

He beat the odds, kicked a drug habit, and got off the streets. He has used his success and influence to advocate for youth who face homelessness.

He began his walk in May in St. John's, Newfoundland, and made it to Ontario in late September, guided along the way by the Ontario Provincial Police. He is scheduled to make it to Vancouver by late September of next year, ending a 9,000 km trek.

"He is doing this to raise awareness and funds, and to prevent and ultimately end youth homelessness," Carroll said in an interview on Thursday.

She said Roberts wants to get young people off the streets before they become adults and end up chronically homeless.

Carroll said Roberts is an advocate for the idea that there are no such thing as bad kids. Home circumstances can have a disastrous impact on young lives, and that was certainly the case for Roberts. He grew up in a good family in Barrie, ON., but after his father died and an abusive stepfather came into the family, his life took a troubling turn.

"Joe ended up leaving home at quite a young age, and ended up living in the streets of Vancouver," Carroll said. "By the time he was 18, he was also pushing a shopping cart."

He eventually got life-changing support from his mother and an OPP officer/mentor. He entered a drug addiction treatment program, and went on to study business marketing in college. He was a natural in business.

The Push for Change Foundation is a national charity lead by Roberts, and engages educators, unions, police services and all levels of the government.

While Roberts achieved business success, he had a nagging feeling that there was more he could do for young homeless people. A friend encouraged him to walk across the country, seeing it as the best way to bring attention to an issue. It took about four years of planning to make The Push for Change journey possible.