

Joe Roberts stops in Espanola

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Photo by Patricia Drohan/For The Mid-North Monitor Students from Esc Franco-Ouest and Sacred Heart School welcomed Joe Roberts as he entered Espanola after walking from Sudbury. Roberts is walking across Canada to raise awareness of youth homelessness.

Esc Franco-Ouest students and Sacred Heart School, grades seven and eight students, were on hand to greet Joe Roberts as he walked into Espanola, just before noon on Thursday, Jan. 19.

Roberts was homeless as a teenager and decided he needed to do something powerful to increase awareness that youth homelessness is steadily increasing across Canada. He got help as a young man and he made it out of the spiraling hopelessness of drugs and mental illness. He is walking 9,000 kilometres over 17 months as a way of reaching out to young people to tell them there are ways to get help. Along the way, he will be visiting 400 schools and community events delivering his own powerful message by telling his story. He's also raising funds for shelters and agencies that support homeless teens.

At the south entrance of town, students, staff, members of the Espanola Police Service and Ontario Provincial Police greeted Roberts with cheers, whistles and signs, and promptly fell into line behind Roberts, who is pushing a symbolic shopping cart across Canada to raise awareness. The parade of students and staff walked from Tudhope

and Centre Street along a two-kilometre route to the Espanola Recreational Complex.

Roberts began his walk on May 1, 2016 from St. John's Newfoundland and has been walking ever since. Thursday, Jan. 19 marked his 264-day of walking, 4,905 kms, drinking 1,193 litres of spring water and eating 264 bowls of oatmeal.

Roberts and his wife Marie, also his campaign director, had not planned on stopping in Espanola on the route from east to west on the Trans-Canada Highway, but an invitation from Danielle Raymond-Paquette, a teacher at Esc Franco-Ouest several months ago, convinced Roberts he should come to Espanola to meet the students who have been inspired by his walk for homelessness.

On Oct. 2, 2014, Raymond-Paquette and some of her students slept in cardboard boxes in the Giant Tiger parking lot as part of a lesson for the students on homelessness. It rained that night, but they persevered. The article by Jessica Brousseau on Esc Franco-Ouest's night of being homeless, appeared in the Mid-North Monitor. Raymond-Paquette sent Roberts a copy of the article so he and Marie would know that a visit from him would mean a lot to these students.

After the walk through Espanola, the group gathered in the upstairs room at the complex for a video of Roberts' walk since leaving St. John's, Newfoundland.

Roberts told his story to the guests beginning with his earliest memories when he was in Grade 3 in Midland, living with his mother, father, older brother and younger sister.

His father always praised him and taught him that "we all have unlimited, untapped possibilities."

Roberts said he liked school, but he loved when it was 3 p.m. and time to go home. He couldn't get home fast enough to be with his family.

He described a perfect family life until one day in 1975 his father suddenly died. "Our family was never the same," said Roberts.

His mother had a small part time job, but there was no money to pay the mortgage and all the bills and she was desperate. When Roberts was nine years old, his mother re-married and her new husband was not like his father, the exact opposite.

"He tore me down, he was abusive, and an alcoholic."

Roberts said that if someone can get you to believe bad things about you, they can gain control of you, and that's what happened. His older brother started doing drugs with his friends and Roberts said "I did it to feel like I belonged. My home was chaos and I felt protected under the influence of drugs."

At age 15, he went on his own, suffering from trauma after his father died, addiction, and he was in no way able to look after himself. Roberts said in Ontario, 40% of teenagers leave home because of the poor quality of life.

He also talked about the invisible homeless, the "couch surfing" when homeless teens are not necessarily living under a bridge, but crashing at one friend after another's house to sleep. It was a "process of erosion in my life and at 16, I dropped out of school."

"What kind of life would you have if we took away school and your home?" he asked the students.

He began to commit petty crimes to survive in the streets of Midland and Barrie. In his late teens, he hopped a bus to Vancouver, a city of two million. He struggled in the late 1980s living under a viaduct, pushing a shopping cart around with his meager belongings and trying to collect cans or bottles to cash in. He said he had long matted, dirty hair and is only alive today because of community policing, food banks and homeless shelters.

His mother never gave up on him and came out to Vancouver to get him and bring him back to Ontario. Roberts said he had a mental illness with depression that he couldn't handle, he didn't have the tools. His mother came home one evening and found him with a pistol in his room. He was considering taking his life. His mother called the OPP and Roberts said that was the best thing she could have done, because a hero by the name of Scott MacLeod, Constable 5767 saved his life.

"Scotty got it right," said Roberts. "I got the drug treatment that I needed, and I eventually went to college."

Roberts kept in close touch with MacLeod, writing letters to him telling him what his help meant to him, how it changed his life.

Roberts graduated from Loyalist College in Belleville with a 3.9 GPA and remarked that he had failed out of three high schools and never thought he was smart enough to go to college.

Giving all the credit to his mother and to Constable MacLeod, Roberts went on to become a successful businessman and even made the cover of Maclean's magazine in 2003 under the heading, "Canadians who make a difference."

Roberts told the students that "fear will hold you back, fear will crush your potential."

He said, find something that you can do and stick to it, no matter what. When he was trying to think of how he could raise funds to "shore up some of the support systems that are in place to help homeless youth," a friend said why don't you run across Canada to raise awareness. Roberts said as a non-athlete at 230 pounds, he could only walk.

Roberts, his wife Marie, and friend, Jamie Orozco, who drives the safety van and takes pictures along the trek, have made it half-way. When people say to Roberts, isn't it hard to walk in Ontario and out west in the winter, he says simply, "isn't that the point." Life is not always easy.

For more information and photos go to: The Push For Change on Facebook and www.thepushforchange.com.