

Push for Change on its way

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Pushing a wonky shopping cart across the tiled floor of a grocery store can set most people's teeth on edge.

Joe Roberts has taken it many steps further by pushing his shopping cart across Canada in an effort to raise money for youth who are facing difficulties in their lives.

Roberts began his 9,000-kilometre walk on May 1 in St. John's, N.L., and hopes to finish Sept. 30, 2017, in Vancouver, B.C., where he lived on the streets as a drug-addicted youth in the 1980s.

"I was quite disengaged at a young age and very awkward in high school," Roberts admits.

"There was a lot going on under the surface. Like many kids today, I suffered from anxiety and depression. I found acceptance in the drug culture," he says.

"Like many people, I sold myself short for the feeling of fitting in somewhere."

Born and raised in the Barrie area, Roberts fled to Vancouver in 1986 and lived on the streets and under a bridge

until 1989 when he returned home in an attempt to clean himself up.

While suffering through drug withdrawal, Roberts had a mental breakdown and was considering suicide by gun when Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) Const. Scott McLeod showed up at his mother's house and helped him cope with the stress.

After a stint in rehab, Roberts turned his life around. Within a decade, he'd bought a share of the Mindwave Design tech company and made it rich.

"My 'aha' moment was 12 years later, I was driving through the downtown east side of Vancouver in my 7 Series BMW and I saw a kid pushing a shopping cart. I got to work and I was on the cover of a business magazine and Macleans magazine had just named me as one of 10 Canadians who were making a difference," Roberts recalls.

"I realized not everyone has a pathway out like I did, so I started the Push for Change walk in an attempt to reach the kids while we still have them captive in high school," he says.

Roberts begins his days at 5 a.m. and walks 24 kms before finishing at approximately 1 p.m., and then he'll often visit schools or community centres to speak about his reasons for walking.

He'll arrive in North Bay Jan. 12 – day 257 of his 517-day trek – when he will speak at Nipissing University at 3 p.m. and drop the puck at a North Bay Battalion game at 7 p.m.

Throughout Roberts' walk, the OPP has played a major role, helping raise awareness about the risk factors associated with homeless youth.

OPP Comm. Vince Hawkes says he believes Roberts' walk gives police an opportunity to speak about troubled youth.

"The Push for Change is a perfect opportunity to engage with community stakeholders and partners to spread awareness about homeless youth and help mitigate the underlying risk factors that lead to the vulnerability of homelessness," Hawkes says.

With a goal of \$18 million, Roberts says sponsors are funding his trek across Canada. Funds raised will be divided between host communities and a national coalition called A Way Home to fund its Upstream Project.

"They are the thinkers behind what we do," Roberts says. "They know to end homelessness – it's not about bowls of soup and a sleeping bag."

Roberts says to end youth homelessness, Canadians must invest in prevention.

"If you don't, you'll never put the fire out," he says.