

# Orillia Packet and Times

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PATRICK BALES/THE PACKET & TIMES Prior to Joe Roberts's appearance at the Orillia Mayor's Levee on New Year's Day, he took part in a presentation to the Lighthouse Soup Kitchen and Shelter. Beneath the Blanket presented approximately 30 blankets to the shelter, collected prior to Christmas. Pictured, from left, are David Watt and Michelle White, of Beneath the Blanket, Marie and Joe Roberts, of Push for Change, and Linda Goodall, executive director of the Lighthouse.

A sobering notion permeated through part of the the Mayor's Levee in Orillia on New Year's Day: while so many were ringing in the new year at our homes, far too many were out on the street with no place else to go.

Worse, a significant number of those homeless are youths, boys and girls under the age of 18 who aren't able to live in a home for any number of reasons. Those are the people Joe Roberts is hoping to help.

Roberts is halfway through his 9,000 km walk across Canada. With the Push For Change, Roberts is pushing a shopping cart across the country with the goal of ending youth homelessness.

"Push For Change - and everything that it stands for - is a possibility of changing the way we address youth homelessness and ergo thereby changing the way we look at adult homelessness," Roberts said Sunday.

His first official visit to Orillia on his journey was Sunday at the levee, spending the day in the city before heading to Coldwater Monday. He'll return to the area for events in Midland Jan. 9 and Orillia Jan. 10.

But his cause has been well advertised to residents, through a number of fundraisers and other awareness events aimed at shedding light on the issue of homelessness, both youth and in general. One such event was the SleepOut

Challenge, held Nov. 25

Roberts is a fan of the insight offered by sleep outs.

"You'll never replicate the experience of homelessness. You can't, because I can take away everything, but I can't take away your home," he said. "Doesn't matter if you're doing five days, 10 days or 20 days, the only thing I can replicate is the hardship; the emotional stuff you can't. But, what you can do is give people an empathic experience, where they say 'wow, if I had to do this every day, it'd suck.'"

It was a sleep out done with 350 corporate leaders that was the impetus for the Push for Change. "Relatively conservative folks," he said. The next day, a CEO told Roberts he'd "never look at this issue the same; you have forever changed the way I see this."

Roberts spoke via satellite to the participants of the Georgian SleepOut Challenge. At the end of it, those who slept outside donated their blankets to an initiative helping services aimed at helping the homeless.

Before Roberts' appearance at the levee, he was joined by Linda Goodall of the Lighthouse Soup Kitchen and Shelter and representatives of Beneath the Blanket, to take part in a donation of blankets to the men's shelter. What started as a student initiative at Georgian College has developed into a grassroots charity.

"It was just supposed to be a blanket collection, but it kind of grew bigger," said Michelle White, president and founder of Beneath the Blanket, now in its second year. "I don't even know how many blankets we've collected."

Between Nov. 20 and Dec. 15, the organization collected the blankets for the Lighthouse, one of the many organizations - including Youth Haven and Living for Jesus - in Simcoe County to benefit from Beneath the Blanket. The group's first donation was also to the Lighthouse.

Just before Christmas, another group slept outside in support of the Lighthouse and its work. Goodall spoke to all the participants before they went to bed and then again in the morning, when they went in for breakfast at the Best Western Mariposa Inn. The prevailing thought for many was that they were going to take the day off from work to catch up on all the sleep they missed and recover from the night they spent outdoors.

It's a luxury the actual homeless don't have.

"Those who are actually sleeping outside, they don't get to have a warm hot breakfast and take the day off work to sleep all day," Goodall said. "They have to do the same thing over and over again."

Roberts knows all too well what it takes to survive while living on the streets. He was a homeless addict as a youth before turning his life around to become a successful entrepreneur, earning the colloquial title "The Skid Row CEO."

The first time White saw Roberts speak, he said that being homeless is a full time job. She relayed to him during the presentation of the blankets to the Lighthouse just how much that speech resonated with her.

That resonance, that extra awareness, is what would make the Push For Change an overall success, Roberts said, even more than any money raised through the campaign.

"When Rick Hanson wheeled around the world 28 years ago, his intention was not accessibility. His intention was raising dollars for spinal chord injuries. But as a result, it sparked a larger conversation about accessibility," Roberts said. "The Push For Change is part of a bigger thing happening across the country. What we bring into communities like Orillia, Barrie and Midland is a heightened level of awareness to what is already going on. Hopefully, what we're doing is connecting people and resources, so long after we've left there is a deeper conversation going on."

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