

Roberts speaks to local students

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MEHREEN SHAHID/THE PACKET & TIMES Joe Roberts, back, shared an afternoon at the Orillia Opera House with some 11-year-olds from local schools. From left, Ian Ackert, Anna Lajoie, Brianna Rich, Thea Rich and Megan Clark.

It's Day 255 and Joe Roberts is only halfway done pushing for change.

The homeless-youth-turned-entrepreneur was back in Orillia Tuesday to speak with local youth.

But Mother Nature had other plans, as inclement weather led to the cancellation of school buses, so only five students attended Roberts's talk at the Orillia Opera House.

"I liked the video, when they showed everything (Roberts) did," said Megan Clark, 11, from Notre Dame Catholic School, who said she also learned one person can make a difference. "I can do it if I try."

Roberts was presented with a cheque for \$5,207.42 by the OPP Youth Foundation. The money was raised through a number of events held in the region.

"This area has been incredibly supportive toward Push for Change and the OPP have been behind this 100%," Roberts said. "The work that we're championing is really about prevention, and the OPP, long before we came along, were heavily invested in community safety for Ontario youth."

"They're supporting it not just because I have a connection to the OPP, in that my transformation came from an interaction with a police officer, but because it really aligns well with their mission and their current direction in community policing and mental-health strategy," added Roberts.

After his father died at the age of 35, the stand-in father figure in Roberts's life, his stepfather, flipped his narrative from "I love you" to "You're stupid." Depressed and unable to deal with his emotional turmoil, Roberts ran away from his home in Midland, ending up addicted and homeless in Vancouver.

In 1989, a call from his mother brought him back to her house in Midhurst. But the journey to reformation was only half-complete. On a particularly bad night three years later, Roberts was ready to take his life when an intervention by Const. Scott MacLeod helped him find hope.

"I'm a community investment gone correct," Roberts said, adding, two days ago, going through his home community, he felt immensely proud of where his journey had brought him.

Now Roberts wants to champion the cause by involving key players, such as communities, educators, health-care professionals, front-line service providers and law enforcement.

"(Law enforcement) used to be the call of last resort, but now they're a call of first resort because of eroding systems and structures and social support," said Roberts. "So, it's really key for policing to understand what are the key issues. Is this a criminal issue or mental-health issue? Is this someone who is in crisis or someone who is a threat?"

"And the encouraging thing we're seeing from police forces across the country is that they are embracing a mental-health strategy," he added.

A lot has changed over the years in terms of how front-line officers deal with a call involving mental-health issues, said Insp. Pat Morris, commander of the Orillia OPP detachment.

"These situations can be multi-faceted and complicated and the police have received more training to help better."

"When you go out on a call, you want to be empathetic and assist the person through communication and to demonstrate we're here to help and connect them with appropriate sources in the community," he added.

As a resident of Orillia, said Morris, he wasn't as aware of homelessness and mental-health issues as he has become through his profession. That's one of the problems Roberts wants to see addressed through this movement.

"There's a universal message around the notion that homelessness doesn't exist in this community," he said. "Coming from Midland, which was 5,000 (population) at the time and 17,000 now, there's a notion that 'If I don't see it, it's not here.' That's not to say that there isn't the same amount of youth at risk. It's just that they're invisible, they're couch surfing – a young person from any town can end up homeless."

Mayor Steve Clarke, who was also at the opera house, said youth homelessness is one of the many issues in the community he would like to have addressed.

"There's discussion around the possibility or the probability of a youth shelter and engaging the proper stakeholders that supply the support for that shelter," he said. "This project is about pre-emptive and early indications that people might get into a life of trouble and ways to prevent it. And I think that's what I would like to see the city work on, too."

In support of Push for Change, Georgian College's Orillia campus has already hosted one SleepOut Challenge, raising money for the campaign and to support a future youth homeless shelter in Orillia.

A second SleepOut Challenge will take place at the college March 3.

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