

Push to end youth homelesses arrives in Parry Sound Wednesday

parrysound.com/news-story/7057032-push-to-end-youth-homelesses-arrives-in-parry-sound-wednesday/

Camping for change

Stephannie Johnson/Metroland

From left, OPP Constable Aaron Jeffery, OPP Auxiliary Constable Nathan Jeffery, Parry Sound Fire Fighters Daric Toews and Terry McEwen were four of the six campers who slept on the roof of the Parry Sound Fire Department Hall on Jan. 6 in support of the Push for Change.

[next](#) [play/pause](#) [pre](#) 2/2

PARRY SOUND — Wednesday morning, Joe Roberts is walking into town with Ontario Provincial Police officers at his side.



In an effort titled Push for Change, Roberts is eight months into pushing a shopping cart in a cross-country walk raising awareness and funds to end youth homelessness, focusing on prevention. Along the way he's stopping to share his story with school children and officials, and inspiring community members to champion the cause, including members of his community safety partners, the Ontario Provincial Police.

"It's really unpacking homelessness, what it is and what it isn't, and in the smaller communities debunking the notion that we don't have homelessness here, when we do in every small community likely across the country ... what do these things look like? It's mental health, it's low self-esteem, it's addiction, early childhood trauma, sexual abuse, these are the root cause of homelessness," he said. "The second thing is sharing a story of transformation is always a home run. Getting people to tap into their own struggle, their own adversities, their own challenge and see themselves through a possibility or hopeful mindset is absolutely crucial. If you can get them tapped into hope, get their little feet moving in the right direction, they can realize their potential ... and the last thing is what we can do to get to the place where we can prevent youth homelessness."

The story of transformation Roberts uses is his own. Now 50, at 22 the small town Ontario man found himself addicted to heroin and living on the streets of Vancouver. His mother brought him home and an officer talked him from the brink of suicide. He then got his post-secondary education and returned to Vancouver, this time as a successful businessman.

He created Push for Change with Dr. Sean Richardson four years ago and did a trial walk from Calgary to Vancouver in 2012.

The shopping cart is a symbol of chronic homelessness for Roberts with his observation that the chronic homeless often use a cart to hold their worldly possessions.

"When I walk down the streets, and I've walked 3,400 odd kilometres of Canada so far ... I've been walking along and I've walked passed a lot of carts that have been used and then left ... in wintertime the carts get left in parking lots - with snow accumulation they get difficult to move around back to where they need to be," he said. "The

interesting thing to me is children aren't like shopping carts — we don't dispose of them when they stop working right. We don't leave them in the cold, in the parking lot when the wheels are a little wonky and they need a little TLC. And I don't want to live in a country that has disposable children. We can fix these social problems, but we need to create awareness."

On Wednesday, Roberts plans to set out at dawn from the intersection of Clear Lake Road and Lake Joseph Road, travelling along Lake Joseph Road to Rankin Lake Road, Oastler Lake Drive and onto Bowes Street bound for Parry Sound High School.

At the Oastler Lake Road and James Bay Junction Road intersection, OPP Chief Superintendant of the Northeast Region Fern Labelle, Superintendent Director of Support Northeast Region Jim Szarka, Acting Inspector Push for Change Northeast Regional Coordinator Baldassare Nuccio and West parry Sound Detachment Commander Mike Gordon will join Roberts in the final leg of the Parry Sound walk.

While in town he'll speak to Parry Sound High School students followed by a public speech at the Parry Sound Social Services Administration Board building.

Roberts was in West Parry Sound Saturday walking the length of Highway 124 from Parry Sound to McKellar Township and on Monday he backtracked from 40 km north of Parry Sound to Penetanguishene where he put in 24 km before speaking at a school there on the first day students returned after the Christmas break.

"We make sure we walk 24 km every day and then we sew those together," said Roberts. "There are 3,518 km in the province of Ontario and we are actively on track to walk every single one of those," he said

In support of the cause, West Parry Sound OPP auxiliary officer and Parry Sound firefighter Nathan Jeffery organized a camp out, similar to one held in Muskoka for the same cause late last year, on the roof of the Parry Sound Fire Department Hall on Jan. 6 with five other firefighters and police officers. The campers toughed it out in -19 degree C temperatures, plus wind chill, and were supported by volunteers who collected donations for Push for Change as well as non-perishable food for Harvest Share and warm clothing for the Salvation Army.

The camp out raised \$729.50 in cash, plus 153.6 pounds of food and four bags of toiletry items and winter clothing, plus eight brand new jackets.