

# Push for Change 'keeps my feet moving'

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Joe Roberts (Jessica Nyznik/Postmedia File Photo)

Joe Roberts isn't just challenged pushing a shopping cart across Canada to fight youth homelessness.

Public understanding of the issue he is championing during his 9,000-kilometre journey is another hurdle.

"Piercing the Canadian consciousness on any issue is tough," Roberts told The Sault Star. "Piercing it on getting (Canadians') heads wrapped around what youth homelessness is, and what it isn't, sometimes it can feel like you're talking to people about an issue they don't feel personally impacted. That can be an uphill battle."

It's Day 265 when he talks with The Sault Star en route to his jump-off spot east of Espanola. He's logged more than 4,900 kilometres since he began his walk in Newfoundland on May 1. Roberts stops in Thessalon, Bruce Mines and Desbarats on Thursday. He'll attend an outdoor event on Gore Street in Sault Ste. Marie on Feb. 1 from 1 to 4 p.m. and stop in Wawa on Feb. 15.

Roberts, 50, experienced "periodic" homelessness between 15 and 24. He was also on the streets of Vancouver for three years during that time. Roberts remembers being cold, hungry and experiencing "emotional disconnection" getting by in Gastown.

“You're constantly walking around a community and you're on the outside of it,” he said. “Even though you're surrounded by a big city, you're not really part of that.”

Roberts threatened to take his life in June 1991 when he was back home in the Barrie area. An Ontario Provincial Police officer, Const. Scott MacLeod, responded and helped Roberts get the help he needed.

“I never thought in my wildest dreams that my support would come from law enforcement,” he said. “I spent a large portion of my life on the other side of law enforcement. Yet, it was a cop who ultimately had the greatest impact in my life.”

Roberts is encouraged police services, including Royal Canadian Mounted Police, OPP and Sault Ste. Marie Police Service, are training their officers to deal with mental health calls. He calls such awareness “absolutely crucial.”

“There can be a traumatic impact on somebody dealing with a mental health crisis if they're dealt with in a way that they're treated like they were someone who's a threat to society,” said Roberts. “Getting that individual the help they need becomes critical. The answer isn't to throw them into these cells if it's a mental health issue or an addiction issue.”

He wants to reduce youth homelessness by encouraging prevention programs that will address issues such as mental health and addictions while youth are still at school. Taxpayers benefit, Roberts contends, because there's not as much demand on social services such as shelters, social assistance and police.

Roberts is splitting the cash he's raising, about \$350,000 to date, between community groups and Upstream Project, an early intervention program. Pauline's Place, a shelter for youth, will benefit in the Sault. Sponsors cover the walk's costs so all dollars donated help fight homelessness.

“If we don't change the way we invest in prevention, we're going to continue to hurtle forward with a problem that has no sunset,” said Roberts.

About 40 per cent of the kilometres he's logging during his Push for Change are in Ontario. A partnership with OPP is adding 900 more kilometres to the distance he's covering in the province. Roberts welcomes the chance to tap OPP community connections and meet with that many more students.

“The OPP are deeply invested in making sure that every young person in this province, and beyond, gets to where they are going,” he said. “Our two organizations, by working together, can do far more than we we can working apart.”

Roberts estimates he'll have met two million students across Canada by the time his walk ends Sept. 30 in Vancouver, B.C.

He is older than most walkers and cyclists who cross Canada for a cause. He turned 50 on Nov. 25.

“I'm doing good,” said Roberts. “I hope to be this active when I'm 80. We're never too old to rock and roll ... The reason I'm able to keep going is I'm connected to a higher purpose. I'm tethered to something that really keeps my feet moving which is the opportunity to change kids' lives.”

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