

'Barrie boy' brings his Push for Change campaign to his hometown

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Joe Roberts brings Push of Change campaign to his hometown

Rick Vanderlinde/Metroland

Barrie's Joe Roberts walks along Yonge Street Dec. 27 as he brought his cross-country trek to end youth homelessness to his hometown. Dec. 27, 2016.

Barrie's own Joe Roberts brought his Push for Change campaign to end youth homelessness to his hometown today.

After 241 days and 4,503 kilometres of pushing a shopping cart from Newfoundland to Barrie, well wishers and supporters welcomed Roberts as he made his way to a Rotary Club event at the South Shore Community Centre.



"Today is a very special day because I've come back to a community that I grew up in," he told a small gathering of supporters and police officers, including Barrie Police Chief Kimberley Greenwood. "As we roll into this community, this community has a lot to be proud of because this community supported the Push for Change right from the very beginning."

So far, the campaign has raised about \$350,000, with the help of some large donations from the Wayne Gretzky Foundation and the Ontario Provincial Police Association.

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Making it to Barrie is symbolic for Roberts, but his journey is far from over as he and his team set their sights on completing the 9,000-kilometre trek in Vancouver on Sept. 30 2017.

The final destination is appropriate as the British Columbia city is where Roberts had his darkest days as a drug-addicted homeless teen.

"I came from a place where at 15 years old I found myself out of the house. Part of it was my own not wanting to be there because of family conflict. I struggled for a lot of years with addiction and couch surfing and eventually chronic homelessness living in the downtown east side of Vancouver."

Roberts credited retired OPP Const. Scott MacLeod and his mother, who were both at Tuesday's event, for pulling him from the brink of death and getting him back on his feet when he was a teen.

"Scott diffused a very dangerous and very life-threatening situation and my life went in a very different direction. I stayed in contact with him when I graduated college, when I got five years sober, when my daughter was born," he

said. "It's just been one of those fairy tale stories."

But many youth do not have access to professionals who may be able to get them back on the right track, Roberts said.

"The unfortunate thing is that not everyone who needs a Scotty, meets a Scotty. Not everybody has that champion or has the mom like mine. Each year in this country, 235,000 people experience homelessness, and 25 per cent of those are youth.

I wanted to do something to talk about what we needed to do to prevent stories like mine from happening."

Roberts credited police services, especially the OPP, for getting behind his cause. Several OPP and Barrie Police officers walked with Roberts along Yonge Street from Big Bay Point Road and along Lakeshore Drive to the South Shore Community Centre.

"When we went to Ontario Provincial Police, they said we are going to get behind you, not necessarily because of the story of Scott and Joe but because mental health and youth safety and crime prevention are at the heart of good policing," he said.

As he prepared to enter the centre to speak with Rotarians, Roberts gave a rousing patriotic salute to this country.

"Canadians have a way of embracing these things. We stand for social justice. We're a tough and rugged nation, but a nation who cares. We are the True North, Strong and Free and as we usher in Canada's 150th anniversary as a nation, I proudly go forward as a Barrie boy, carrying that symbol of hope and transformation as I continue my walk."

For more information or to donate visit thepushforchange.com