

Midland-born philanthropist pushing for change

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Joe Roberts walking across Canada to raise awareness of youth homelessness



Ian Burns/Metroland

Joe Roberts recently reached the halfway mark of his 9,000-kilometre journey across Canada to raise awareness of youth homelessness. He stopped in Midland Jan. 9 to tell his story to local high school students.

After more than 4,000 kilometres, Joe Roberts finally pushed his cart to his hometown on Jan. 9.

The Midland-born philanthropist, who is currently trekking across Canada to raise awareness of youth homelessness as part of his Push for Change campaign, came to St. Theresa's Catholic High School where he shared his story with the assembled students (with students at Georgian Bay District Secondary School watching via livestream).



Roberts was born in Midland and moved to Barrie in Grade 7. The death of his father and a difficult relationship with his mother's abusive boyfriend led him to the streets of Vancouver, where he was homeless and became addicted to drugs.

"How does a kid from 759 Dominion Ave. in Midland end up on the streets of Vancouver using heroin and jumping in and out of dumpsters collecting cans?" he said. "That story happens to 35,000 young people across the country, and it doesn't need to."

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Roberts eventually managed to pull himself together, graduating from college and embarking on a multimedia business career that led to his being named one of the top young entrepreneurs in the country by Maclean's magazine.

But his past never left him, leading him to set up the Push for Change, using the symbol of a shopping cart to bring the issue of homelessness to the forefront of people's minds.

"If you polled the average person in Midland and Penetanguishene if they had youth homelessness, they'd probably say no," he said. "You sometimes don't see it in smaller communities. But it's there."

Roberts said intervention needs to be done long before young people end up on the street.

"Get to them before they're sitting on cardboard outside a liquor store," he said.

Roberts said he has been in contact with numerous politicians and is in the process of setting up a meeting with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in order to discuss how to invest in programs that help youths early in their struggle.

“Let’s take the strain off the emergency sector,” he said. “Help the young people and get them the resources they need to thrive and exit the system.”

Roberts recently reached the halfway point of his 9,000-kilometre journey across Canada. He wants to be in Vancouver, the place that holds so many negative memories for him, by Sept. 30.

For more information, visit thepushforchange.com.

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