

Homeless man turned CEO will visit Sault

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Joe Roberts, travelling across Canada with a shopping cart to raise awareness of the need to fight homelessness, is scheduled to be in Sault Ste. Marie Feb. 1. Photo supplied.

Joe Roberts will team up with local, former homeless youth for Gore Street event scheduled for Feb. 1

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We're familiar with people running, walking, bicycling or even wheel chairing across Canada to raise awareness and funds for various good causes.

As Push for Change president and CEO, Joe Roberts, 50, is currently pushing a shopping cart across the country to fight homelessness.

Roberts, who is based in Barrie, went from being homeless to being a successful entrepreneur.

Roberts will be appearing in Sault Ste. Marie Feb. 1.

"My story of success is really not my story, it's the story of services and people who supported me out of homelessness, people in mental health services," said Roberts, speaking to SooToday by phone from Blind River as he approached the Sault, on schedule for his Feb. 1 visit to our community.

Roberts spoke highly of programs such as Bell Let's Talk, which aims to raise awareness of, and remove the stigma from, mental health issues.

"We need to talk more about the systemic failures young people face when they're dealing with addictions, mental health and early childhood trauma, and what is the cost to the individual, the family, our society and culture when we turn our back on that."

Roberts was born in Midland, Ontario and was raised in Barrie.

"I was the typical kid from a normal, middle class family with a Dad that went to work, a Mom that stayed at home. Dad passed away when he was only 35. So we lost that patriarch, that leadership and the economic support because he was the main breadwinner of the family," Roberts said.

"My Mom remarried relatively quickly and the guy was an abusive alcoholic...the dynamics of the family changed and I found myself struggling with low self-esteem and by the time I was nine I was experimenting with drugs, by the time I was 15 I was non-compliant at home, I couldn't get along with stepdad, so at 15 I left home."

"I became one of a very high number of young people who find themselves on the street due to family conflict," Roberts said.

"I was couch surfing, and within a year I dropped out of school...I got in trouble with the law and by the time I was 19 or 20 I had moved from the Barrie area out to Vancouver, and at that time you would have seen me pushing a shopping cart around Vancouver's east side, addicted to heroin, living outdoors."

Roberts credits his mother for helping him begin his road to recovery by convincing him to return home to Ontario.

But that road to recovery was a long road.

"One night I had a mental health breakdown and I was suicidal, I had a weapon (a 9mm handgun) and the OPP were called."

In his experience up to that point, previous encounters with police were not favourable, Roberts recalled.

On this occasion, the attending police officer was a huge help.

"Instead of seeing a man who was a threat, he saw a kid in crisis," Roberts said.

Roberts said a critical factor is that he was sent directly to hospital that night, not to jail.

The OPP officer who came to his home, Roberts said, was ahead of his time in his approach.

"What I'm encouraged with is that the OPP, the RCMP and other police forces across the country are now embracing a mental health strategy to understand the difference between 'sick' and 'bad.'"

"I'm a storybook example of the system working."

Eventually, Roberts completed business and marketing studies at a community college and became a successful entrepreneur.

He sold copiers and audio-visual equipment before getting into digital media in its embryonic stages.

"We were producing digital media before YouTube...we were taking companies from print brochures to websites, from VHS cassettes to CDs and DVDs."

That was leading technology in the late 1990s.

Roberts credits his survival skills which he learned on the streets of Vancouver as one factor in his business success.

Roberts also encourages young people to launch out and not be afraid of failure in their careers, pointing to the lumps and bumps of his own as a business man before reaching success.

Roberts launched Push for Change in 2011 and is now its full-time president and CEO, meeting with students, politicians and business leaders, educating them on the issues behind homelessness.

“We can’t wait until a kid is in crisis before we say ‘we can help you now’...if we wait that long we know statistically we have a higher chance of losing them forever into chronic street life or premature death.”

Instead of running across Canada, a friend encouraged Roberts to push a shopping cart, so common with homelessness, across the country.

“He said ‘why don’t you push that?’”

“You can talk to people along the way, talk to political leaders, businesses and kids and inspire the country to change the way we address homelessness and I really liked that idea, and called it Push for Change.”

Roberts started his push in St. John’s, Newfoundland May 1 and is on schedule to finish in Vancouver Sept. 30.

He is accompanied by his wife and a Push for Change friend and administrator, travelling behind him in an RV.

“I get up at five in the morning, meet with our community safety partners such as the OPP or city police, and I begin walking a 24 kilometre walk, after which there is often a meeting and event with a school, political leaders, the OPP...our reception has been phenomenal.”

Roberts said he has been greeted and supported along the way by celebrities such as Walter Gretzky, Pinball Clemons, Don Cherry and many others, as well as political leaders at all levels.

The Push is also a fundraiser for anti-homelessness services, having collected approximately \$390,000 so far.

Locals are invited to attend a free outdoor public event for Push for Change on Gore Street from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Feb. 1.

Roberts will meet and speak at an outdoor rally, with warming barrels, hot chocolate, tents and activities on scene.

John Farrell, a former local homeless youth, will also address the audience, speaking about his own trials and successes, and to point to the importance of Pauline’s Place, a local youth shelter.

In 2016 alone, 169 youth stayed at Pauline’s Place Youth Shelter, occupying 1,554 bed nights, an increase of five per cent from 2015.

The two men will also speak later that evening at a dinner for community leaders and families, hosted at Quattro.

“We need to invest in prevention of homelessness...we need to intervene in the schools when children are aged seven, eight, nine, we need emergency services for people entering into crisis (such as homeless shelters and mental health services), and to take a look at housing initiatives to help people exit homelessness and poverty.”

“We need housing first.”

By addressing that, Roberts said, Canadian society can, most importantly, cure homelessness and save lives, and in the long run, turn out productive citizens and save society money.

More information on Push for Change can be found [online](#)