

# Erin students urged to seek social justice

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## Push for Change rolls through

*Marie and Joe Roberts with Grade 7 and 8 students from Erin Public School, walking from their school over to Erin District High School for the Push for Change presentation.*

On the first day of winter and day 235 of his “Push for Change” movement, Joe Roberts arrived in Erin to reach out to over 700 students from Erin Public and EDHS with a powerful message:

“Everyone should have access to a safe, warm home; food and access to the resources to make themselves successful,” he said.

The goal of the campaign is to one day eliminate youth homelessness and he is pushing a shopping cart across Canada to promote his cause. Joe says the shopping cart is a symbol of “chronic homelessness”.

During his visit Joe explained to the students that there are many reasons for homelessness – family violence, mental health issues, addiction, abuse or early childhood drama.

EDHS Principal Stephen Gayfer introduced Joe and shared some statistics on homelessness in the Erin area. Gayfer said in April of 2016, 295 individuals in Wellington County had experienced some level of homelessness and that 29% of those were youth aged 16 to 24. 40% of those were homeless due to a family conflict.

Joe, now 50 and originally from Barrie, knows only too well the struggles and dangers of youth living homeless. In his 20’s Joe found himself addicted to drugs and living under a bridge, pushing a shopping cart around Vancouver, collecting bottles and cans to survive.

Joe credits divine intervention, and the efforts of his mom, who brought him back to Ontario and the efforts of OPP officer Scott Macleod for getting him clean and back on the road to success. He became a successful businessman and decided to “pay it forward” by starting the Push for Change campaign.

It truly is a labor of love. Joe’s traveling companion is his wife Marie. What most people didn’t realize is that Marie was Joe’s first crush in high school. They met in grade 10, dated for a while then went their separate ways. Marie had no idea that Joe, at one point, had been living on the streets.

In 2012, 28 years after they first met, they reconnected during Joe’s trial walks for the campaign that took place in Calgary and Vancouver. They stayed in touched and last Easter they got married and are now sharing this adventure together.

“A honeymoon of sorts,” says Marie who is campaign director for Push for Change. Joe credits Marie for organizing this entire trek and they both credit the amazing support of the OPP for the campaign’s success.

The campaign started in Newfoundland last spring and will end in Vancouver this fall. The 9,000 km, 517 day trek across Canada will visit 10 provinces and 3 territories and visit 400 communities. Erin marked the nearly “half way”



point of the venture.

Joe closed his presentation at the high school by saying his message is one of “possibilities and social justice” and to let the youth know they are “absolutely extraordinary”.

What are Joe and Marie’s plans after the campaign has wrapped up? They plan to settle in Vancouver and to take “a second honeymoon” in Australia.