

Push for Change as Canadian as hockey and maple syrup, says organizer

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Arron Pickard

Joe Roberts stops in Sudbury as part of 9,000-km trek to end youth homelessness

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Joe Roberts' ultimate goal is to have a screening process in every single high school in Canada to identify students at risk of dropping out.

It's those students who, like Roberts himself, are more likely to find themselves living on the streets. And it's that reason Roberts is pushing a shopping cart across the country — to start a conversation about what needs to be done to reduce and end youth homelessness.

“I was a kid who ended up on the streets at a very young age, but I came from a very normal, middle-class family,” Roberts said, on Day 260 of his 517-day Push for Change campaign. He made a stop at Science North on Sunday, before heading to Sudbury Community Arena to watch the Wolves in action. “When I look back, there were key indicators in my life where we could have intervened, and could have prevented it from happening. We know there are better ways to approach youth homelessness by working with kids inside the school system.

“So we need to find out where we need to go on a systematic level to reduce the number of youth ending up homeless; thereby, changing the face of how we react to youth homelessness across the country.”

Push for Change will span 9,000 kilometres. It started in St. John's, Nfld., and will end in downtown Vancouver.

“We started nine months ago in May, and I've walked more than 4,800 kms to be here in Sudbury. The support is great from everyone. We are going to finish on Sept. 30 in downtown Vancouver about nine months from now.”

Crossing the country for a cause is as Canadian as hockey and maple syrup, he said. What he needed to do was to make Push for Change unique to homelessness.

“In 1989, I pushed a shopping cart around the streets of east Vancouver as a young boy. Shopping carts represent chronic homelessness, so we thought why not push a shopping cart, which is an outcome we are trying to avoid. That way, we can engage with the communities we walk through.”

Ending homelessness is up to everyone, he said. The models he has seen that are working involve all levels of government, but it also involves law enforcement, health care, children's aid, educators, parents and the young people. It's about putting that young person first, and understanding what the root causes are, like family violence, early childhood trauma, addiction and mental health.

“Then we can build a better system to reduce the flow of these young people who are ending up on the streets,” he said. “We need to work better inside the school systems to pre-identify young people who are at risk before the drop out of school, then end up on the street.”

Individually, people need to ask how they can contribute to help put an end to homelessness. That can be anything from joining a board or making a donation to a homelessness organization, he said.

“Each one of us can do our part,” he said. “Not everyone can walk across Canada pushing a shopping cart, but each one of us has time and talent that we can lend towards this great cause.”

So far, Push for Change has raised about \$350,000, with 100 per cent of those funds going to support youth homelessness programs.

Roberts isn't finished with Greater Sudbury, either. He will deliver a speech to Sudbury's youth at the United Steelworkers Hall on Monday, in order to educate at risk youth on the prevention of homelessness.

Highschool students from le Conseil scolaire public du Grand Nord de l'Ontario (CSPGNO) , le Conseil scolaire catholique du Nouvel Ontario (CSCNO), Rainbow Districts School Board and the Sudbury Catholic District School Board will be in attendance.

In addition, United Way is organizing a fundraiser on Monday evening at 5 p.m. entitled "It's Chili Outside." The public is invited to gather at Memorial park, Downtown Sudbury for a chili dinner and hot beverages offered by the Blue Door Soup Kitchen.

Roberts will be present as guest speaker. This event is free of charge.