

# Push for Change heading to Sudbury

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Joe Roberts with the Push for Change campaign walks with students at the Woodstock Community Complex on Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016. He will be in Sudbury in about two weeks. (MEGAN STACEY/Postmedia Network)

If you happen to stumble upon a man pushing a shopping cart down Highway 69 in mid-January, chances are likely it is Joe Roberts trekking through sleet and snow to raise awareness for homeless youth.

Roberts, who was homeless himself as a young man, started The Push for Change to advocate for the prevention of youth homelessness. He is walking across Canada pushing a grocery cart, which he says can be challenging, especially in the winter.

"It's a modified shopping cart," he laughs. "At the end of the day, the shopping cart is really symbolic. It's an outcome that we're trying to avoid for young people in this country. Shopping carts represent chronic homelessness. It's something we're trying to avoid for kids and young people."

Shopping carts come in handy for the homeless. Roberts says they can be used to collect items -- especially recyclables -- or to hold one's belongings.

"It can be flipped on its side and two of them can be used as a makeshift shelter," Roberts explains. "I used the shopping cart to collect cans and bottles, which supported a drug dependency."

Roberts lived under a bridge and was homeless for much of 1989. In a We Day video ([vimeo.com/188067924](http://vimeo.com/188067924)), he

describes his destitution on the streets of Vancouver.

"It was a cold and rainy day in 1989 on a park bench in Vancouver when I sold the boots off my feet to survive," Roberts begins. "I was desperate, lonely and ashamed. I didn't think my life could go any lower."

But luckily, someone shared with him a few pearls of compassionate wisdom that stuck. They told him he was more than his circumstances, more than he could see in a mirror.

Roberts describes his childhood. He says he had a good mom, but when the wee boy was only eight years old, his father died and his mom remarried.

"My stepfather was a bully. He would say things to me like, 'you'll never amount to anything'," Roberts shares.

He started using drugs at just nine years old and at 15, Roberts ran away from home and quit school, eventually making his way to Vancouver.

In 1989, Roberts was addicted to heroin, but he got clean with help from his mom, his community, a kind and benevolent police officer and a long-standing commitment to never use again, which continues to this day.

"One night I had a mental health crisis -- a suicide attempt -- and OPP Const. Scott McLeod was the on-scene officer. He defused a very dangerous situation, which opened the door for me to go to treatment in Belleville," Roberts says.

He was just 24 years old.

Roberts says according to last year's statistics, there are 235,000 homeless people in Canada, 20 per cent of whom are young people 13 to 24 years of age.

"I believe the opposite of addiction and homelessness is not recovery or having a home, but connectedness," Roberts says. "I'm a byproduct of a community investment. I'm here because of organizations like the Salvation Army, the soup kitchens, the food banks -- a safety net within a country that doesn't give up on its poor and marginalized. I'm here because of a mom who wouldn't quit and a police officer that gave me an option. I'm here because I had access to drug treatment and education."

Roberts admits there are flaws in Canada's social service system, but he says there is also a lot of good, which can yield positive results for young people.

"Not all childhood homes are created equal and we don't get to choose where we start," he says from his hotel room in Orillia. "As a country, we need to re-evaluate our social contract with all our citizens and say, alright, what can we do to pave the way for those who didn't have an easy start to life and what can we do to help reduce the strain on the emergency services sector by providing more stepping stones to create more stories like mine?"

The best way to prevent harm, Roberts says, is to prevent homelessness by monitoring kids at school and watching out for them. It is vital to stop it before it begins.

"There's a vast difference between preventing a forest fire and putting out a forest fire," Roberts quips. "We put a lot of forest fires out. We're constantly throwing water on things, but preventing a forest fire is educating people not to throw their cigarette butts out the window. ... If we're ever going to see a sunset on this issue, we need to work upstream. We can't wait until the kid is on a piece of cardboard outside the liquor store ... We need to help them when we found out in Grade 7 that they're living in a home that's unsafe."

From the depths, he rose. Roberts went back to school, graduating from college with honours, and became president and CEO of a successful multimedia company. Now, he runs The Push for Change non-profit. And in his free time, he walks.

Walking 24 km a day, Roberts, who originally hails from the Barrie area, began his journey in May in St. John's, NL. On Sept. 22, he entered Ontario via Hawkesbury at the Quebec border, accompanied by the OPP and Walter Gretzky. Roberts counts his walk with the elder Gretzky as a highlight of this march. He will arrive in Vancouver on Sept. 30, 2017, after having walked a total of 9,000 km in 17 months.

He expects to go through about 25 pairs of shoes and boots by the time he reaches Vancouver.

The Push for Change rolls through the Nickel City on Jan. 16. He is looking forward to his visit here, as Laurentian University bestowed upon him an honorary doctorate last summer.

To learn more, follow The Push for Change on Twitter at @pushforchange or Facebook. You can also visit [thepushforchange.com](http://thepushforchange.com).

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Saturday, January 14, 2017

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