

Homeless youth turned businessman trekking across Canada to raise awareness, funds for at-risk kids

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Push for Change - Joe Roberts, centre, walks through Rockwood with students from three village schools on Dec. 20. Roberts is pushing a shopping cart across Canada to raise awareness and funds to help prevent youth homelessness. Photo by Jaime Myslik

by Jaime Myslik

ROCKWOOD - ROCKWOOD - Joe Roberts is pushing a shopping cart across Canada to raise awareness and funds to help prevent youth homelessness.

“One of the problems is up until three or four years ago there really wasn’t a high level of understanding of what the causes are, how do we solve it,” Roberts said.

“There’s a lot of biases ... you get that various feedback when you’re speaking to people, it’s judgment.”

Roberts, 50, said the goal of “The Push for Change” campaign is to increase awareness and raise money for the Upstream Project, a program to prevent youth homelessness by supporting young people in school.

“An example of how it works is it monitors the school population, identifies youth at risk and then works to get them the resources they need so they don’t have to leave home or school,” Roberts explained.

“We know where youth are before they become homeless, they’re in classrooms ...

“So the whole idea to change our response to homelessness is not to build more shelters, it’s to prevent them from needing a shelter bed by preventing that homelessness from happening.”

The ideal outcome of the campaign, which made its way through Rockwood, Erin and Guelph from Dec. 20 to 23, would be to raise enough funds to have the Upstream Project or its regional equivalent available in every school in Canada.

Roberts was a homeless youth himself.

“I went at 15 years old and left home,” he said. “I did find housing, but since I left home I found myself in some precarious situations - couch surfing, sometimes having a safe place to stay, sometimes not.

“But the antecedent or root cause of my continuing to deteriorate was addiction and so as addiction took a stronger hold on my life it continued to remove big pieces of my life.

“Finally in my late teens, early 20s I was chronically homeless, living in downtown east side Vancouver addicted to drugs and pushing the shopping cart around collecting cans and bottles.”

In Roberts’ case the outcome was positive.

His mother found him in Vancouver when he was 23 and brought him back to Ontario, where a chance encounter with an OPP officer gave him the opportunity to get his life back on track.

“[The OPP officer] basically saved my life one night and that allowed me to get into drug treatment, go back to college and in less than five years I graduated college, I went out in the business world and I killed it,” Roberts said.

“So in 12 years I went from pushing a shopping cart to being on the cover of Canadian Business as a celebrated entrepreneur.”

But the transition wasn’t easy. Roberts said it was part divine intervention and part self-preservation.

“I started to look around ... and realized if I continue doing this it’s not going to end well,” he said. “So as scary as change was, I made the decision to go home.”

However, Roberts doesn’t focus on how he got out of homelessness. The question he asks is how he ended up there in the first place.

“I’m a good kid from a decent family; how did I end up falling through the cracks?” he asked.

“Every single teacher, school counselor, anyone in my life knew I was a train wreck. Where were the resources when I was 13, 14 and 15?

“And that right there ... is the Swiss cheese in the system we have in this country that unacceptably allows young people to fall through the cracks because of family conflict, addiction, mental health.”

Roberts said he has shared his story for about 20 years with both the corporate world and the recovery community.

However it was an immersion project with Aeroplan in October 2011 that fueled his passion to create a national campaign. During the project the participants experienced what it would be like to be homeless, from food scarcity to panhandling to sleeping outside.

“They went through this kind of transformative experience and the next day people were coming up to me and saying, ‘I’ll never ever look at this issue the same. You’ve forever changed ... the way I see youth homelessness.’

“That left me bothered because I thought ‘for 15 years I’ve been telling my story but never have I had an experience

like this’.”

So the seed for The Push for Change was planted.

From there a team was put together, the idea to push a cart across Canada was formed, and trials and research were carried out.

It was decided that Roberts and his team would push the shopping cart 9,141km across Canada from St. John’s, Newfoundland to Victoria, British Columbia and back to Vancouver by Sept. 30, 2017.

Pushing the shopping cart was key.

“That’s the outcome we’re trying to avoid and it’s integral to my story,” he said. “One of the ... poorest and (most) desperate places you can be in the western world is intercity pushing a cart.”

While The Push for Change team travels across Canada it is engaging in nearby communities along the way.

One hundred per cent of the donations received throughout the trek will go towards the Upstream Project or a similar initiative within the community the team is visiting.

“There’s other really great model communities throughout the country who have done similar stuff ... but in order to do it you have to raise awareness and you have to persuade the government to invest in these kinds of things,” Roberts said.

“But we look at it and say ... ‘you either invest upstream or your invest in emergency crisis. It’s up to you. They’re coming.’

“We can prevent them from coming, which is a lot cheaper and more empathetic or we continue to respond to emergencies.”

The team has sponsors to support its operational costs throughout the trek.

On Dec. 20 students from Rockwood Centennial Public School, Harris Mill Public School and Sacred Heart Catholic School marched with Roberts and heard him speak at Sacred Heart.

“What I try to tell them is to first of all look for the signs of hidden homelessness; family conflict, addiction,” Roberts said in advance of the event.

“Look around you. Homelessness is in every community in this country. It’s not just in the big cities. Homelessness starts in small communities.”

Roberts said he tries to help students realize their untapped potential.

“You can do and be anything,” he said. “You’re nothing but pure possibility, but in order to break some of the old habits of thinking, you’ve got to take some action steps and find out what’s really in the tank.

“So I encourage young people to find what they’re passionate about and to throw their life at it ... Get out of your head and get your feet moving.”

For more information visit www.thepushforchange.com.

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