

Meet Homeless Joe the CEO

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ALONG THE TRANS-CANADA HIGHWAY--If you see some guy struggling westward behind a shopping cart along the north shoulder of the Trans Canada, honk your horn and/or give him a wave. His name's Joe Roberts and even though he definitely looks the part, he's certainly not some homeless guy on the side of the road.

He used to be.

If you had seen him in, say, 1988, it most likely would have been in Vancouver's benighted East Hastings area. When he was 18, Roberts was an addict, sleeping under a railway track and so penniless he sold his boots to survive.

But now? Now he's a former corporate executive self-made man. And he's pushing that cart—"the universal symbol of homelessness"—from St. John's to Vancouver to draw attention to and raise money to help young people get and stay off the streets.

The story of how he got from sleeping on the streets to pushing a cart along the highway is inspirational indeed. Roberts was born to a middle-class family but ran away from his mom and abusive stepfather at 15. A few years later, he was broke, addicted to heroin, and ashamed.



In his early 20s, his mother found him and asked him to come home. Roberts returned. Two years later, he entered rehab in Belleville, ON., and it worked.

After that? College. Then it was back to Vancouver where instead of a drug addiction, he developed a success habit. He started and became CEO of a creative agency called Mindware, specializing in website work. He earned his first million before he was 35.

In 2011, he and a colleague named Sean Richardson decided to "give something back," and invented the non-profit "Push For Change," designed to end youth homelessness in Canada. This trek across the country is their most ambitious effort to date.

Roberts started May 1, 2016, and hopes to reach Vancouver the last day of September. He averages, he says, about 24 clicks a day.

He travels with an RV and usually with a police escort and stays on the shoulder. He avoids 400-series highways. When he is approaching any patch of road where he might compromise vehicular traffic; i.e., where the shoulder is too narrow or there's a blind curve or bridge, he avoids the peril by getting into the RV and "leapfrogging" the section.

Today's Trucking phoned Roberts as he was nearing the community of Blind River, ON., about half way between Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie.

And the first thing he said on picking up his cell? “There goes one of your loyal readers.” (A truck was rolling by.)

“What’s the name on the side?” the reporter asked.

Roberts laughed: “I’ll tell you the name I want it to be: AMJ Campbell.” ([AMJ Campbell](#) is one of Roberts’ sponsors.)
“We also get a lot of support from [Kal Tire](#).”

Joe Saulnier manages the Barrie-ON, Kal Tire. “We’re pleased to support Joe in his efforts to raise awareness of youth homelessness,” he says, adding “making a difference in the communities served by Kal Tire is just part of the way we do business.”

Saulnier says Kal Tire team members are guided by “seven aims” and among them is the company’s ongoing commitment to corporate social responsibility, “focusing on continually improving and recognizing a responsibility to customers, each other, communities and the environment.”

Simon Hermant works in marketing at AMJ Campbell. He says the moving company hopped into Roberts’ basket of supporters for a number of reasons.

“How can you say no to a guy who says he’s going to push a shopping cart across Canada?”

AMJ Campbell champions the sort of entrepreneurialism that Roberts embodies, Hermant says, adding that AMJ Campbell head office encourages its members to support local causes and when they do they know they can count on corporate support. “I can’t remember a time when we said no to a request for support from one of our franchisees.

“There’s a real synergy between a guy like Joe and our franchisees.”

There’s synergy between Roberts and all the other truckers, too.

“Truckers are honking and waving all the time,” Roberts said. “It took me six weeks to cross Newfoundland, so in some cases I saw the same driver 100 times.”

“I love truck stops,” says Roberts. “The drivers are all really interested in hearing my story and I enjoy hearing theirs.

“One thing I’ve learned is, if you’re looking for a good place to eat, don’t look at Trip Advisor. Look for the Kenworths.”

For more information on Joe, youth homelessness and where the money’s going, click [here](#).