

'Push For Change' Co-Creator Is Crossing Canada With A Shopping Cart

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It took 346 days, but a 50-year-old CEO — who was once a homeless teen — has pushed a shopping cart from St. John's, NL to the Ontario-Manitoba border in an effort to raise funds and build awareness for youth homelessness.

Joe Roberts plans to conclude the trip in Vancouver on Sept. 30, but he tells The Huffington Post Canada, "crossing the country for a cause is kind of old news."

"The bigger piece of this is the community engagement," says Roberts in a phone interview. "It's successful when and only when you can activate that base."



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So far, Roberts and his wife and campaign director Marie Roberts have met Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Ottawa, and taken part in over 220 community events in Ontario alone. Roberts currently resides in Barrie, Ont., but hopes to move back to Vancouver at the end of his trek.

"The more kilometres you put behind you, the more people you're inspiring and the more money you're raising."

The "skid row CEO" became made his fortune at multimedia development company Mindware Design Communications, and has become a fixture on the motivational speaking circuit over the past five years.

While he often spends about five or six days straight walking at a regular pace with his grocery cart, he typically uses his day off to complete public engagements or activities, such as speaking at school and even leading a parade. When it comes to resting, Roberts splits his time in either an RV, or nearby hotel. These stopovers serve as a hub for the scheduled events in each area, before it's time to move on to the next stop on the itinerary.

In total, The Push for Change is scheduled to last for 517 days and hit all 10 provinces and three territories. Back in 2012, Roberts completed a [similar shopping cart journey and walked from Calgary to Vancouver](#).



Handout

Joe and Marie Roberts meet Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Ottawa. (Handout)



Handout

Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Jean-Yves Duclos, MP Patty Hajdu, Joe Roberts and Marie Roberts pose with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and MP Adam Vaughan in Ottawa. (Handout)

As he completes his 9,000-kilometre mission, [Roberts has had some help from the RCMP](#) and various community members. Seth and Caleb Marquis of Kenora, Ont. are among Roberts' special helpers who joined him for part of the mission. The brothers, who are 10 and eight, respectively, call themselves the "[Philanthro-Bros](#)" and [donated \\$695 to the cause](#).

According to Roberts, the journey is fully sponsored, so as to allocate 100 per cent of the fundraising dollars to Raising the Roof for The Upstream Project, a school-based youth homeless prevention model in support of Canadian Observatory on Homeless, A Way Home, and Homeless Hub, among several other organizations. And while these causes are obviously quite worthy, there's one big question in need of an answer: what's in his shopping cart?

"There's nothing physically in the shopping cart except for a small pouch that I keep with pins and buttons inside of it for those I meet along the way," says Roberts, while explaining how his accessory is a symbol of homelessness. "Moreso, what's in the cart is the intangibles; hope, possibilities, and a vision for making a shift in Canada."

"The greatest thing my story can bring to the issue is how common and how easily someone can experience youth homelessness or adult homelessness."

The shopping cart push also relates back to Roberts' past, and his experiences with homelessness on and off for [roughly seven years until a suicide attempt led him to detox, recovery, and later, to a marketing course at Loyalist](#)

College.

"The greatest thing my story can bring to the issue is how common and how easily someone can experience youth homelessness or adult homelessness," says Roberts. "I came from a normal middle class family, but I left home too early because of a family conflict. Then I dropped out of school, and I lost the two biggest support systems in my world. I then struggled with mental health and addiction and by [19], I was pushing a shopping cart.

"In 1989, I was a sketched out heroin addict, pushing a shopping cart around the downtown east side of Vancouver... and I ended up a successful Canadian entrepreneur. Inside every one of us is more than we can see. [We're trying to] get [others] to see their possibilities. I think we all at some point question and go through those periods."



Joe Roberts and some special helpers push their cart through the snow. (The Push for Change)

Ultimately, Roberts' message about overcoming obstacles is simple. He's aiming to "plant seeds of possibility" while earning "access to the higher levels of government to determine what we have to do to protect these young people."

"The more kilometres you put behind you, the more people you're inspiring and the more money you're raising."

The 50-year-old has set a goal of earning 50 cents from every Canadian for a grand total of \$17.5 million, but notes that trudging through the Canadian elements during all four seasons can definitely take its toll on the body and spirit. Roberts does not dismiss the mental or physical challenges of his endeavour, and adds that although he's "not an elite athlete," he still finds himself doing "400 marathons back-to-back" because of his obsession.

It doesn't hurt that he's on the road with his wife. He and Marie dated in Grade 10 and lost track of each other for nearly 28 years before reconnecting almost five years ago. The two just celebrated their first wedding anniversary while on their epic trek.

"There's a love story wrapped in the whole thing," says Roberts, with a laugh. He calls her the "nerve centre" of the whole operation.



The Push For Change

Joe Roberts, Marie Roberts and driver Jaime Orozco jump for joy after crossing the Manitoba border. (The Push for Change)

As for their cause, Roberts insists the "currency of awareness" holds equal or greater value to the financial contributions he and his team are receiving on their quest. He is hopeful, too, that the government will take note of The Push for Change, and continue to support emergency services for homeless youth while "making a shift in investment prevention," and create more affordable housing.

The [Liberal government recently pledged to allocate \\$11.2 billion more to affordable housing in new and existing homes](#) in the 2017 federal budget. According to the Canadian Press, the majority of these funds will reportedly be spent after 2022. But Roberts says that even with this promise, there's still a need to push forward and advocate on behalf of homeless youth from a philanthropic and humanitarian standpoint.

For now, though, he's focused on moving on to their next destination: Winnipeg.

"[Talking about the end of 'The Push for Change'] is kind of like talking to a hockey player in the middle of a seven-game series," says Roberts. "They're not looking at it by game seven, but by what's ahead in game five or game four."

Game seven's getting closer each day.



The Push For Change

Joe Roberts pushes his shopping cart through the snow. (The Push for Change)

To read more about The Push for Change, [click here](#).

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