



Students in the social justice and equity class at Beaver Brae and Red Lake District High School made signs for The Push for Change walk on Friday, April 7. More than 300 students joined CEO and former homeless youth Joe Roberts in the walk from McLeod Park to the Seven Generations event centre. KATHLEEN CHARLEBOIS/DAILY MINER AND NEWS

With bald eagles soaring overhead in a clear blue sky, Day 342 of a cross-country trek couldn't have gone better.

More than 300 students along with community partners and OPP officers joined Joe Roberts, the CEO and former homeless youth, in the walk from McLeod Park to the Seven Generations event centre as part of The Push for Change campaign to support the end of youth homelessness on Friday, April 7.

At the centre, following a traditional ceremony led by elder Allan White, Roberts shared how he went from having a happy childhood in a supportive middle-class family to being homeless and pushing a shopping cart in Vancouver's East end.

He said his "larger than life" father passed away when he was only eight years old. His mother remarried, but Robert's new stepfather was the complete opposite of his father.

"I had a bully that lived in the house," Roberts said.

Craving a sense of connection with his older brother and a friend, Roberts turned to drugs and alcohol and struggled

with addiction for the next 15 years.

After a bad fight with his stepfather, he left home when he was only 15.

At the time, Roberts said he felt alone in his situation, but there were several factors he had in common with other homeless youth: early childhood trauma, family conflict and struggles with mental health and addiction.

Roberts said he was also fortunate that he had a champion in his mom, who refused to give up on him.

He eventually got clean and sober, went to college and moved up in the business world, but knew one day he wanted to use his success and pay it forward in what became the Push for Change campaign.

One of the students who listened to the story was 17-year-old Chloe Hollos, who travelled to Kenora from Red Lake with her equity and social justice class to volunteer with the event.

“He’s doing something that really relates to home at Red Lake,” she said. “We have a huge homelessness issue and we’re having trouble keeping the shelter open, so this is a home experience he’s helping with,” she said.

Roberts was also presented with the gift of a blanket and an honour song. Because homelessness disproportionately affects Indigenous and LGBTQ2S youth, he said it’s “absolutely” important to connect with those communities over the course of his trek.

“There needs to be tailored designs put forward to our government to invest in things that deal with prevention and emergency services and Housing First initiatives that are specific to First Nations communities,” he said. “We are judged by how we manage and handle those who are our most vulnerable.”

Now that the Push for Change has made its way through Ontario, Roberts has roughly 3,000 kilometres to go.

“Good luck, Joe,” said Hollos. “We will support you the entire way.”

*KCharlebois@postmedia.com*