

Fifty and formerly homeless: Advocate pushes grocery cart across Canada

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4/11/2017

When he was 19 years old, Joe Roberts was homeless, addicted to heroin and pushing a shopping cart around Vancouver's East Side.

When he returns this fall at age 50, it'll be by choice with a custom-built shopping cart he pushed all the way across Canada.

Roberts co-created the [Push for Change](#) campaign to raise awareness and money to end youth homelessness. Backed by a support team in a van, he has been walking west-bound from St. John's, N.L. since last May and hopes to reach Vancouver by September.

On day 345—after just as many bowls of oatmeal and at least 1,380 espresso shots—Roberts arrived across the Manitoba border. He expects to walk into Winnipeg by April 20.

Roberts spoke to Metro by phone about his journey so far.

The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Metro: How are you feeling 345 days in?

Joe Roberts: "I think emotionally we're feeling good, we're feeling great, we're feeling encouraged. The federal budget was probably the best budget that those advocating for all things homeless have seen in the last 30 years. It's a serious 11-year commitment to affordable housing..."

(The Push for Change) is saying, 'Look, let's support young people before they become street-involved, before they become entrenched in addiction (or) sucked into the sex trade. Let's get at them before they become traumatized and heading towards long-term chronic homelessness.'

And if we do that effectively, we end up inadvertently helping the emergency services sector because we reduce the flow of non-emergency cases coming towards them. And it allows that system to readjust to what it was meant to be, which is short-term stays."

M: Do you feel like people don't understand the gravity of youth homelessness in Canada?

JR: "Yeah, I do. The cool asset that I have is lived experience. And I get access to police commissioners, assistant commissioners, access to mayors, to provincial leaders and policy makers (through the campaign). We had an opportunity to meet with our prime minister. And I can tell a story of lived experience, but then point to the directions that we need to go."

M: How long were you homeless for?

JR: "Off and on between the ages of 15 and 22. There were different stages of my homelessness. At 15, I was couch surfing, living in unsafe environments. You wouldn't have seen me on the street, but I didn't have safe and consistent housing. (I was) chronically homeless from about the time of 19 to 22."

M: How did you manage to pull out of it?

JR: "For me, it's a story of good people and systems. So I had a mom who wouldn't give up on me and she brought me back to Ontario. There was a failed suicide attempt and an Ontario Provincial Police officer named Scott

Macleod. He was called to my mom's residence and he diffused a very dangerous situation and that opened the door for me to go to detox, then full-time residential treatment. Then I went back to Loyalist College and I graduated with honours and went out into the business community.

I don't know where I'd be without mom and Scott. So I had the right people and champions in my place, but I also had access to detox, access to treatment, access to education. So the systems piece became very, very important for me."

M: Do you think you would have had the same success if you were homeless now, in trying to get access to those same services?

JR: "(That) depends on (location). In Vancouver, no. I got clean in 1991. So that was a long time ago—26 years ago. This country's slowly retracted its investment in all things to deal with social supports and programs. We're now seeing the government come back to it, but that erosion, combined with a whole bunch of other things... the trajectory of where some of these social problems have gone and what we've seen compounded. I think it's harder for a story like mine to happen today."

Follow The Push for Change's progress on social media and on their website: thepushforchange.com.