

Former homeless youth making a ‘Push For Change’

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Lanny Stewart

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Joe Roberts called himself a typical kid from a typical home – until an early crisis in his life changed everything for him.

Roberts, from Midland, Ont., was only eight years old when his father died. His life got turned upside down and inside out, he says, when his stepfather, an abusive alcoholic, moved in.

“Back in the mid 70s, you didn’t talk about domestic violence or alcoholism like we do today,” he told the Journal.

The family struggled, he says.

“My mom was a victim of domestic violence. As kids, we weren’t so much physically abused but there was a lot of emotional abuse.”

Roberts began using drugs at the age of nine. At the age of 15, he was non-compliant at home and wound up leaving. At the age of 16, he dropped out of school. He says it was shortly after that he found himself couch surfing at different friends’ homes, was on the streets sporadically without a roof over his head. Meanwhile, the drug use escalated.

“By the time I was 19, I was homeless, collecting cans and bottles, pushing a shopping cart around the streets of East Vancouver.”

He never thought in his wildest dreams he’d escape addiction, the hopelessness, he says. However he was one of the lucky ones and his story turned out well because of the family support he received and the intervention of a caring police officer in a crucial time in his life.

Roberts returned home under the caring eye of his mother but as much love and support she provided, she couldn’t help him with the mental and addiction issues he had in his life. One night, Roberts attempted suicide and the police were called. Roberts recalls a police officer who arrived at the scene, who he says, saved his life.

“He diffused a very dangerous situation for both him and I and given another night and another set of circumstances, I may have not have escaped that interaction.

“Instead of seeing a man who was a threat, he saw a boy in crisis,” he added.

What followed was a cascade of positive events in his life, Roberts says.

“I went to college after drug treatment. I graduated with honours, I entered the workforce.

“Less than 12 years after with the right support and the right system and access, I went from pushing a shopping cart and being homeless to being on the cover of Canadian Business as a celebrated entrepreneur in Canada,” he added.

Roberts says his story is what happens when you invest in possibility. It’s why he co-founded, alongside friend Sean Richardson, “The Push For Change” a national awareness campaign and youth empowerment project. Roberts, who has spent years as a public speaker relaying his inspiring story to so many, is currently in the midst of a cross-Canada walk pushing a shopping cart, stopping in several different communities across the country, including Brandon later this month.

Roberts will be attending a gala charity dinner and celebrity art auction at Brandon University’s Harvest Hall on April

29 where he'll be speaking. A portion of the proceeds from the dinner will go towards the prevention of youth homelessness in the area. There are also plans in place for a Walk with Joe Parade in the Wheat City as well, which is slated for May 1 at 2 p.m. On May 2, Roberts plans on speaking to students at local high schools.

The Kiwanis Club of Brandon along with the Brandon Urban Aboriginal Peoples' Council, Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation, Brandon Friendship Centre and the City of Brandon have gotten on board to champion the Push For Change initiative and are playing a key role in organizing the dinner and walk from a local perspective. Hamid Mumin, president of the Kiwanis Club of Brandon, first approached Roberts two years ago at a Kiwanis convention where he was a keynote speaker.

"I love listening to him," he said. "He's very inspirational and it kind of changes your approach to things."

Mumin says Brandon Push For Change events have and will be taking place in lead up to the dinner and walk. This includes a youth ambassador sub-committee that's been formed comprised of university students and other youth in the area. Folks can check out the Push For Change - Brandon Facebook page for more information.

Doors open for the dinner and art auction at 5 p.m., while dinner will take place at 6 p.m. The master of ceremonies for the evening will be Brandon mayor Rick Chrest.

Folks interested in more information and tickets to The Push For Change gala dinner in Brandon, can call Frank Thomas at 204-724-5749.