

Push for Change campaign reaches Winnipeg

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JEN DOERKSEN / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Joe Roberts is pushing a shopping cart across Canada to raise awareness of youth homelessness.

When Joe Roberts stepped up to the podium outside of City Hall on Wednesday to advocate against homelessness in Canada, he spoke with the perspective of having been there before.

Roberts, a former homeless man who transformed himself into a very successful entrepreneur and motivational speaker, is pushing a shopping cart across the country as part of The Push for Change campaign.

The goal is to get Canadians to join the fight against homelessness while they travel from St. John's, N.L., all the way to Vancouver.

"I think that for me, having that lived experience keeps my feet moving because I know what that despair and hopelessness feels like," the 50-year-old Roberts said.

When Roberts was 16 he left his home in Ontario to escape an abusive stepfather, having already started drinking and doing drugs at the age of nine. Ending up on the streets in Vancouver at the age of 20, Roberts was eventually brought back home by his mother three years later. He got sober in 1991 and went back to college. Less than 12 years after entering the workforce, Roberts turned a small web design company into a multimillion-dollar business.

Roberts and his wife, Marie, were greeted at City Hall by local dignitaries, including Mayor Brian Bowman, Grand

Chief Jerry Daniels of the Southern Chiefs' Organization and Louis Sorin, CEO of End Homelessness Winnipeg.

Sorin said Roberts' initiative was "bold and courageous."

"Joe has captured the essence of homelessness in a concrete kind of way," Sorin said before the event. "That is unique in a way, that someone would show that level of courage and commitment to an issue to undertake this."

End Homelessness Winnipeg has been working with The Push for Change to help raise money and awareness for homelessness, especially among youth. Sorin said that building awareness is a "key first step" in combating the problem, and he added that Roberts' cross-country campaign helps draw attention to homelessness initiatives at a local level as well.

Bowman lauded the work being done by Roberts and The Push for Change, calling Roberts "absolutely inspirational."

"Homelessness, and youth homelessness in particular, is something that we need to end," Bowman said after the event. "We're really looking for End Homeless Winnipeg to lead the charge... we're really wanting to support them."

Almost a year in, the walk has been physically and mentally challenging for Roberts. He singled out walking near Lake Superior during the winter as one of the toughest parts of the trek so far.

But Roberts isn't willing to stop yet. "My experience drives passion," Roberts said. "This isn't about discipline, this is about obsession."

The 9,000-kilometre venture started on May 1, 2016, and is scheduled to end on Sept. 30 of this year. All money raised in Winnipeg for The Push for Change will be split evenly between national charities for housing and homelessness such as Raising the Roof and local groups like the Resource Assistance for Youth.

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