

Pushing Across Canada to Fight Youth Homelessness

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At 15, Joe Roberts chose the streets over living a fractured home life, and the downward spiral began.

"In 1989, I was homeless on the streets of Vancouver, a young man pushing a shopping cart collecting cans and bottles to survive."

Flash forward nearly 30 years and he's still pushing a shopping cart, but this time it's to take up the gauntlet to battle youth homelessness in Canada with his Push for Change campaign.

Roberts was on day 431 of his 517 day walk across Canada when he crossed Hwy. 22 heading west on Hwy. 1. Over the last 14 months he has logged over 7,860 km on foot, 24 km a day, pushing a specially constructed shopping cart, he uses as a symbol of chronic homelessness. Following him in a support vehicle is Rob Cook, an old friend from the streets of Vancouver, while his wife Marie runs the campaign from a RV and is never too far away.

"We're having a conversation with Canadians about how we need to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness. Crossing the country on your own steam is a really neat thing to do, but nobody really cares unless you're engaging the community," he explains. "In about three months we'll be in Vancouver celebrating the end of the trek, but the advocacy will continue."

Whether you are in a urban centre or rural Alberta, he believes the core issues remain the same: mental health, addiction, family conflict, family violence and early childhood trauma.

"These are things that exist in every community in this country and by supporting young people early they can avoid them entering into volatile situations. If we provide support when they are beginning to have troubles we can help them avoid street life."

He says the first 90 days away from the home for a young teenaged boy or girl tells the tale.

"A couple of those mistakes that happened in those 90 days could end up changing the complete projectory of their life and you see them experience 20, 30, 40 years of homelessness."

He would know.

"The reason I left home at 15 is that the environment was very unsupportive. and there was a ton of conflict. My stepfather was a violent abusive alcoholic and at 15 I simply couldn't handle it anymore and I left. That story repeats itself across this country and it's the largest reason why young people experience homelessness--family conflict. For some it may be that kind of conflict; for others it might be darker."

His rebound began when his mom and an OPP officer teamed up to convince him to try again. He received treatment for his multiple addictions, hit the books and studied business marketing, made his first million at age 35 and went on to become CEO of the highly-successful Mindware Designs Communications. He's now a widely sought motivational speaker some know as the "Skid Row CEO." He has also authored several books.

But most homeless youth don't have this Cinderella story to tell.

"We either take action, or we don't and if we don't it then we begin to look at a problem in this country that has no sunset."

