

Pushing for Change: Youth Homelessness Advocate strides into Kamloops

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KAMLOOPS — As a young man, Joe Roberts found himself homeless on Vancouver’s downtown east side, collecting empty cans in a shopping cart to earn money to support his drug habit. Fast forward almost 30 years and Roberts — now a successful businessman, and motivational speaker — has spent the past 458 days pushing a shopping cart across Canada, to help raise awareness and funds for the battle against youth homelessness. He stopped in Kamloops today, where he shared his story.

“Out of a move of desperation, I ended up selling the boots I was wearing off my feet.”

For Joe Roberts, selling his boots to help finance a drug habit was rock bottom.

“All I could think was ‘I’m a good kid, with a good Mom. How could I end up on the 100 Block of East Hastings?’”

That realization Roberts felt at that moment led him to call his Mother in Ontario, who pulled him off the streets and helped get him into a recovery program.

“If you give me a shot, I promise I will make the most of the opportunity,” Roberts explained, recounting the story of how he began his recovery. “The other promise I made was I’ll do something to pay it forward.”

Roberts got that second chance. He took classes at Loyalist College in Ontario, eventually graduating with a 3.94 GPA. He’d go on to have a very successful career in business, which brings us to the giving back part.

“My friend said to me ‘When Canadians want to raise money for something, they run to cross the country, Joe. It’s kind of our thing.’ ... I said ‘No thanks.’”

Joe continued the story. “Then [my friend] said something clever. He said ‘Maybe you don’t run. Maybe you walk. Why don’t you push a shopping cart? It’s a symbol of chronic homelessness. It’s a throw to your story. It’s an outcome you’re trying to avoid.’”

Which is how the *Push For Change* campaign came about. So far, Roberts has spent the past 457 days walking from Newfoundland — an 8348-kilometre journey up to this point, which he plans to complete in September in Vancouver — all to raise money and awareness for the prevention of youth homelessness.

“We really believe that people that have ‘lived experience’, those that have first voices, should be helping to lead the action, and help us know what we can do in preventing youth homelessness,” Katherine McParland, Youth Homelessness Manager at *A Way Home Kamloops* explained.

Both McParland and Roberts agree shifting the focus from response to prevention could help keep the vulnerable youth in our community from going down a path which can be difficult to come back from.