

Homeless symposium hears inspirational message from Push For Change advocate

 infotel.ca/newsitem/homeless-symposium-hears-inspirational-message-from-push-for-change-advocate/it45491

8/25/2017



Push For Change advocate Joe Roberts was keynote speaker at a symposium on the homeless that took place this morning, Aug. 24, 2017, at the Penticton Trade and Convention Centre.

Image Credit: SUBMITTED/Push For Change.com

August 24, 2017 - 9:00 PM

PENTICTON - A widely mixed group of approximately 70 individuals gathered at the Penticton Trade and Convention Centre early this morning to discuss mental health, homelessness and addiction issues, led by the compelling story of "skid row to CEO" Push For Change advocate Joe Roberts.

Roberts took a break from the final days of his [cross-Canada trek of pushing a shopping cart](#), a symbol of homelessness, to raise awareness about the issue in Canada.

He backtracked from his location in Hope after being invited to speak to the Penticton gathering of city officials, city staff, social workers and society members this morning, Aug. 24, to discuss gaps, overlaps and strategies in Penticton's campaign to help the homeless.

"This is not to be a blame game about how we got here. There's a growing awareness about the issues of mental health, addiction and homelessness in the city and several groups have formed who want to make a change," Mayor Andrew Jakubeit said, adding Roberts was invited to "get us pumped up, motivated."

Roberts, 51, related a personal tale of his “lived experience” of a homeless addict who was able to eventually rise above his afflictions.

Raised in Ontario, Roberts ended up in Vancouver’s downtown Eastside in the 1980’s, on the street and addicted to heroin. Three days before Christmas, 1989, he recalled how he had one of the worst days of his life.

“I’d been living in the downtown Eastside for two years, I was addicted to opiates, and I was in this vicious cycle of using drugs. I got to the point where I began to descend into withdrawal, and I needed \$10 dollars,” he said.

“I didn’t know where it was going to come from. I didn’t want to steal or rob or hurt people, but I didn’t want to feel the way I was feeling anymore. I remember sitting in Pigeon Park, completely broken, wondering where that \$10 bucks was going to come from,” he said.

“I got up and walked into the bar across the street. I sold the only item of any value I had left in the world. I sold the boots I was wearing,” he said, adding, “I remember walking out of that bar, and the only thing that was merciful that day was that it was raining, so people couldn’t see that I was crying as I walked up the 100 block of East Hastings.”

Roberts called his mom, who brought him back to Ontario. He credits his recovery to the people in his life who “saw the possibility” in what he could be.

Roberts' story is even more remarkable in that he went on to become a successful businessman, eventually making the cover of Canadian Business, and recognition in Maclean's magazine.

He told the gathering about society’s need to look at the core reasons for homelessness, noting most cases originate from a handful of similar root causes.

“Not all homes and childhoods are created equal. There are multiple pathways into homelessness,” he said, noting in his own case, his life had been “awesome” until the sudden death of his father at age eight and the subsequent marriage of his mother to a stepfather who was mean and abusive.

Roberts praised the efforts of those in attendance, saying he wouldn’t be around today if not for the community support available to him at the time.

“There’s no getting a haircut and pulling your socks up without housing,” he said, noting he had been fortunate enough to go from the street to having a roof over his head in a single day after contacting his mother.

“There has to be housing first. Without housing, all the other auxiliary support services don’t work,” he said.

Roberts says the homeless issue can be looked at through three different “windows”: one of empathy, one of pragmatism, or one of indifference, telling the gathering to take on a “possibility mindset.”

“I stand to eliminate the window of indifference. I don’t want to live in a country with disposable people,” he said.

Roberts discovered his ability to express himself in public engagement, which prompted his involvement in Push For Change.

He’s in the final stages of the Push For Change walk, having pushed a shopping cart 8,661 kilometres across the country to date, with 411 kilometres to go.

“Creating change is hard work. It’s possible but it takes everything we have,” he concluded.

Roberts hopes to wrap up the walk in a grand finale in front of the Vancouver Library on Sept. 29.

[photos, videos or news tips to the newsroom](#) and be entered to win a monthly prize draw.

We welcome your comments and opinions on our stories but play nice. We won't censor or delete comments unless they contain off-topic statements or links, unnecessary vulgarity, false facts, spam or obviously fake profiles. If you have any concerns about what you see in comments, email the editor in the link above.

News from © InfoTel News Ltd, 2017

