

Pushing for Change across Canada — one step at a time

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Joe Roberts and his Push for Change cross-country walk to raise awareness and funds to prevent youth homelessness stopped at Kamloops United Church on Tuesday. For more information on his initiative, go online to thepushforchange.com. Dave Eaglers/KTW

Joe Roberts describes his early years as a “sitcom childhood,” but by the time he reached 15, his life was in turmoil.

At eight, Roberts’ father died and the man his mother married soon after was not the affectionate, dedicated parent that had come before.

“I went from a father figure who said things like, ‘I love you’ and ‘You can be anything’ to one who said, ‘You’re stupid,’” Roberts said.

In the subsequent years, it was the latter that started to seem most likely.

By 15, Roberts was couch surfing with friends to stay housed, while experimenting with alcohol and drugs to numb the chaos of his home life. By the next year, he had dropped out of high school. By 19, he had worn out his welcome in the small Ontario town in which he had grown up.

Roberts hopped a bus from Toronto to Vancouver, in search of a job. Instead, he would spend the next several years sliding further into homelessness and additions, eventually pushing a shopping cart around the city’s Downtown Eastside neighbourhood and living on the street.

Speaking at a charitable breakfast organized by Kamloops’ A Way Home committee on Tuesday, Roberts recalled his lowest moment — a few days before Christmas in 1989, when he sold the boots of his feet for drug money.

Soon after, he called his mother — an option Roberts said he was lucky to have — and was able to enter rehab and begin getting his life on track, attending school and founding a tech startup in Vancouver.

But Roberts' experiences as a homeless youth and young adult never left him.

"I believed I was bad," he recalled. "I never once questioned whether there could have been something done to protect me."

Today, he sees the years he spent homeless as part of a broader systemic failure, which still leaves youth across the country living on friends' couches or on the street.

"I was a train wreck waiting to happen," he said.

And, while teachers and other adults in his life knew what was going on, services and programs to prevent Roberts from becoming homeless did not exist.

It's that gap which inspired Roberts to set out across Canada 15 months ago with a much-modified version of the shopping cart he once pushed around the streets of Vancouver.

His speech in Kamloops came 458 days and 8,348 kilometres into his trek.

The Push for Change project is raising funds for programs such as Project Upstream, dedicated to working with young people at risk of becoming homeless. Roberts said Push for Change is also his attempt to change the way society looks at youth without a home.

"We judge it instead of understanding it," he said, noting family trauma and mental-health issues are common themes in many stories from homeless youth, not just his own. Roberts said looking for those indicators can help keep young people off the street, as can housing initiatives designed with youth in mind.

To learn more about Push for Change, go online to thepushforchange.com.