

A push for change in Maple Ridge

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Joe Roberts made a promise to himself that if he ever got off the streets of Vancouver and received a second chance at life that he would pay it forward.

It was just before Christmas in 1989 and Roberts, 22, was at the lowest point of his life.

He was living under the Georgia Street Viaduct and had just sold the boots off his feet for \$10 to stave off withdrawal.

“I remember feeling utterly lost and filled with despair and hopelessness,” said Roberts.

“I asked the question how did I get here and I didn’t have a good answer. And then I thought what am I going to do,” said Roberts who called his mother in a last ditch effort to get himself clean.

His mother flew him from Vancouver to Barrie, Ontario, where Roberts grew up, but he continued to struggle with addiction.

Then he reached a crisis point. Roberts had holed himself up in his mother’s basement with a 9mm pistol and was planning to kill himself.

When the police arrived a constable named Scott MacLeod, who has since retired from the force, began talking to Roberts.

“He came into the basement and what was in front of him was disheveled young man and I was wearing a long housecoat and my hands were in my housecoat pockets. So, he had no idea if I was actually holding that weapon,” said Roberts.

“He actually saw me as a human being. He saw me as a kid in trouble versus a man who was a threat,” he continued.

Instead of being taken to prison that night, Roberts was taken to the psychiatric ward of Royal Victoria Hospital in Barrie where he was given the proper help.

Roberts went through six months of rehab and went back to school, earning a business degree and going into sales. He moved back to the west coast and started a small tech company with a friend. He was so successful he was featured on the front cover of Canadian Business Magazine.

Now Roberts is paying it forward quite literally as he walks across the country pushing a shopping cart to raise money and awareness about youth homelessness.

“We wanted to engage the country, we wanted to inspire the country and a call to action to communities to get active. Cultural change doesn’t happen without awareness campaigns,” noted Roberts.

He also wants people understand how homelessness happens, a familiar story that mirrors his own.

“It’s family conflict, addictions, mental health and early childhood trauma,” explained Roberts, who credits a mother who never gave up on him.

Some of the solutions that Robert would like to see is better investment in housing first.

“And not just keys to an apartment but the services that are necessary for that individual to be successful,” he said.

Also prevention models for youth to pre-identify young people who are at risk while they are still in school.

Youth homelessness is a health care issue, says Roberts, not a moral deficiency.

Roberts did a trial walk in 2012 from Calgary to Vancouver to understand how to engage the country.

He will be walking through Maple Ridge Aug. 30 and 31, attending three community events.

Starting at 8:30 a.m. on Aug. 30 he is inviting anyone aged 13- to- 18-years to join him in his 4.3 kilometre walk through the city.

Then from 9:30 p.m. to 8 a.m. there will be a Sleep-Out Challenge for youth at the Greg Moore Youth Centre where those aged 13- years to 18-years can enjoy a swim, pizza and movies for \$25 per person.

At 8 a.m. on Aug. 31 there will be a Community Fundraiser Breakfast with Roberts, the Push For Change team and Sleep-Out Challenge participants. Breakfast will be by donation at the Greg Moore Youth Centre.

Money raised will be going to The Upstream Project, a school-based youth homeless prevention model administered by Raising the Roof.

Roberts will be finishing his walk across Canada with a celebration in Vancouver. His good friend, retired Cst. Scott MacLeod, will be flying out to congratulate him.

For more information about any of the Maple Ridge events call Youth Services at 604-467-7443