

Millionaire walks through Revelstoke on cross-Canada trek for youth homelessness

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By Emily Kemp, Special to the Review

While the challenges of walking 9,000 kilometres across Canada are undoubtedly hard, it's different from what it's like being homeless.

The difference? Former street kid turned businessman Joe Roberts said it's the despair.

"Being on the streets is uninvited adversity," he said in Revelstoke last week. "You're saying this sucks and I can't see any light at the end of the tunnel. There's a level of hopelessness."

Roberts was periodically homeless from the age of 15 and chronically from 19 to 23. He grew up in Midland, Ontario, a small town like Revelstoke, and later ended up on the streets of Vancouver.

Family conflict is what pushed him there among other things. Drugs — Roberts had been using since age nine — kept him on the streets.

Roberts' organisation [Push For Change](#) is creating awareness about what can be done to support youth before their critical breaking point, rather than being a taxpayers' cleanup down the line.

But Roberts acknowledges his adversity armed him for success, particularly in his experience as a sales person.

"I was just as clever in a boardroom as I was on the street, but none of that would have been able to find the light of day if it hadn't been for the resources around me and my champions (his mom and a police officer who got him off the street)," he said.

The Push For Change campaign includes a lot of public engagement because, as Roberts said, no one is going to care if he was just walking. The organisation is championing prevention of homelessness with programs in schools as well as affordable housing.

"I was an average kid from a small town," Roberts said. "Did I need to become homeless, a heroin addict, pushing a shopping cart? The answer is no.

"The smart thing to do is provide those resources and more stories like mine can happen. I'm not special."

Roberts said about 35,000 youth experience homelessness each year in Canada. In Revelstoke those teetering often deal with a number of issues such as abuse and mental health issues and have an unstable home, tending to couchsurf at friends.

"You've got hidden homelessness in a community like this," Roberts said.

The Push For Change walk is covered by sponsors and any donations received during the walk or online is donated, half to relevant local organisations and half to national homelessness charity Raising The Roof.

Revelstoke will likely stick in Roberts' mind for the day he broke a new personal record. He does a minimum of 24 kilometres a day but on Monday, July 24, walking from Canyon Hot Springs through to west of Revelstoke, he did 60 kilometres — 18 more than a marathon.

On another note, 21 pairs of shoes — that's how many he's gone through since the beginning of this epic journey.