

Crossing Canada with a cart for a cause

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Joe Roberts on his cross-Canada walk for the Push for Change campaign aimed at raising funds and awareness for homeless youth. (Push for Change/Submitted)

May 1, 2016, marked day one of Joe Roberts' 17-month trek from the east to the west coast of Canada. The 9,000-kilometre journey started in St. John's Newfoundland and will end in Vancouver on Sept. 30. The Omega caught up with Joe 455 days and 8,300 km into his journey in Sicamous on July 30 as he was making his way to Kamloops for a community event on Aug. 1.

"I'm doing something unique in a cross-Canada trek, in that I'm pushing a shopping cart. The shopping cart is a representation of chronic homelessness. What we wanted to do from the very beginning is raise awareness and dollars to support youth homelessness across the country. We also really want to talk about what some of the solutions we can implement are, so that youth-at-risk don't end up on the street, chronically homeless and pushing a shopping cart," Roberts said.

Roberts' passion for preventing homelessness, especially in youth, comes from his own personal experience.

"In the 1980s when I was in my late teens, I was homeless and living on the streets of Vancouver, addicted to drugs, pushing a shopping cart, collecting cans and bottles to support a drug dependency. My story ends well, but many don't," said Roberts.

Roberts said there are two reasons his story ends well: access to services and a mother who never gave up on him.

"When things got really bad, I reached out to mom and she brought me back to Ontario, and I was able to access alcohol and drug treatment, deal with addictions and deal with the chronic homelessness. I got an opportunity to go back to school and in less than 12 years, I went from someone who was chronically homeless on the streets of Vancouver to being on the cover of Canadian business magazines as a celebrated Canadian entrepreneur," Roberts said.

The Push for Change campaign has raised approximately half a million dollars so far. Roberts said these funds are

essential for implementing policies and services that can help youth in need, but raising community awareness and making connections with municipal, provincial and federal leaders is the campaign's main focus and just as important as raising dollars.



“If you are going to shift and change cultural norms, you have to start with awareness,” Roberts said. “You have to find ways to spark those conversations, the awareness campaigns, in order to shift and create those changes. So, when opportunities happen at a municipal, provincial and federal level, it’s top of mind and those decision makers will make those decisions.”

The cause of youth homelessness usually surrounds issues of addiction, mental health, early childhood trauma, and family conflict. Roberts says that his ability to overcome his personal struggles with addiction, mental health and chronic homelessness came from having a way out.

“We need to, right across the country, invest in prevention and continue to invest in emergency services and look at housing first for youth. If we don’t do those things, prevention and housing first, what we have is young people coming into a system with no exit. So, we’re not stopping them from entering into homelessness and we’re not helping them get out of homelessness,” Roberts said.

The Push for Change campaign advocates for investment in prevention, emergency services and housing first in order to provide support to youth at risk while they are still in high school.

“If we don’t invest in prevention and housing first we’ll never see a sunset,” Roberts said.

Roberts continues to walk 24 km every day until he reaches his destination of Vancouver, but said he’ll continue to raise awareness even after the walk is over.