

Man pushing shopping cart across Canada arrives in Cloverdale on Saturday

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Thirty-one years after Joe Roberts was a homeless youth making his way to the Downtown Eastside, he will push a shopping cart through the streets of Cloverdale.

He's pushed this shopping cart over 8,800 kilometres across Canada, starting in St. John's, N.L. in May 2016, hitting Mile Zero on Vancouver Island, and making his way back to the Lower Mainland to end his country-wide journey in Vancouver.

Along the way, he will pass through Cloverdale on Sept. 23.

It's part of a movement called [The Push for Change](#), which Roberts started six years ago to change the way people look at homelessness in Canada.

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"We wait until it's a crisis," he said. "We wait until there's tent cities, and there's standoffs between the police and the homeless community. We wait until it's a crisis before we say, 'Gosh, I think we might have a problem here.'"

“We’re not going to get rid of the problem,” he said later. “But we can dramatically reduce the numbers by making a shift in how we react to it. We can’t just wait until the fire breaks out and then send out the fire brigade, because that’s not working.”

The Push for Change came out of an idea Roberts had after talking to a corporate group in Montreal about his experience with homelessness and seeing the group raise \$80,000 to combat youth homelessness.

“On the heels of that, I was excited,” Roberts said. “Because I thought if we could do this with a group in one day, what could we do across the country?”

He brainstormed with friends about how he could inspire, educate and engage Canadians across the country, raising awareness about youth homelessness and funds to stop it.

“A friend of mine said, ‘Well, if Canadians want to raise money, they run across the country. Why don’t you run across the country?’” Roberts explained.

“At the time I was 45 years old, I was 50 pounds overweight and I’m not an athlete. I’m a business person, I don’t want to run to the corner,” he continued.

He was worried it had been done before, that too many Canadians had taken a cross-country trek to raise awareness. So he decided to add the shopping cart — a symbol of chronic homelessness.

“Whether we’re in Whalley Ring Road or the Downtown Eastside, or even in Langley or Cloverdale, we see people who are chronically homeless,” Roberts said.

“By the time we see a shopping cart, whether they’re pushing their belongings or collecting cans, what we’re looking at is chronic homelessness. It’s the end of a line. And that’s what we want to avoid for young people in this country.”

Roberts reached the end of the line in his teens during the 1980s. Growing up in Barrie, Ont., Roberts had a “decent childhood” until age eight, when his father died. His mother remarried.

His step-father was “a violent, abusive alcoholic,” Roberts said. At 10, he started experimenting with drugs and alcohol to attempt to deal with the difficulties at home.

“The problem was the drugs helped me,” he said. “They helped protect me from the negative emotions of that very distressful homelife. So they started as a pattern.”

By 15, he left home and had the beginnings of addiction. At 17 he went to prison for the first time, and at 19 he bought himself a Greyhound ticket and took the bus to Vancouver, hoping for a job at Expo 86.

“When we look around the homeless community in the Lower Mainland, Victoria, there’s a reason why we have so much of it out here,” Roberts said. One reason is the temperate climate — it’s easier to live outside in Vancouver than it is in wintery Barrie.

“It’s also, at least for me, a place to run to,” he added. “And when you’re running away from something in Canada, Vancouver’s as far as you can run.”

He stayed in Vancouver, sliding deeper into addiction. At one point, he went into a bar near Pigeon Park and sold the boots he was wearing to support his drug habit. It was just before Christmas.

“I was really ashamed,” he said. “I didn’t see myself as a homeless junkie, but I was.”

It was at that point Roberts called his mom, and she offered him a ticket back to Ontario.

He took it.

He moved back into his mother's house — his step-father now gone — and although he still struggled with addiction, he eventually went to treatment, started college, graduated with honours and entered the business world.

"When you look at my story, it's like I had the right people. I had housing. I had access to the right support services ... and then reintegrated back into the community," he said. "What didn't work was that when things were going wrong at 15 with family conflict, the beginnings of addiction, childhood trauma, there were big holes. So Joe fell through the cracks, as do 40,000 young people a year."

That's what The Push for Change is trying to stop.

"We need to make the shift to how we're responding to homelessness by getting in front of it," he said.

"We need to do something to stop the flow of people entering into homelessness. And if we don't do that, you're looking at a problem that simply has no sunset."

Throughout his walk across Canada, Roberts has spoken to a variety of different groups, including high school classes, to raise awareness about how youth homelessness happens, and how we can end it.

On Sept. 23, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. at the Cloverdale Community Kitchen, Roberts will be bringing his message to Cloverdale, partnering with Community Living BC, Options Community Services and the Cloverdale Community Kitchen.

Only six days later, his trek will end at the Vancouver Public Library.

When it's over, Roberts isn't sure exactly what will happen. He'll be going on his honeymoon with his recent bride and campaign director Marie Roberts, and the foundation will continue spreading Robert's message.

"What does the next 20, 30 years of the foundation look like? It's for us to continue to tell the story that former homeless youth Joe walked across Canada because he was inspired to have a conversation on how we can end youth homelessness," Roberts said.

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On Thursday, Sept. 14, Joe Roberts officially walked across the country to raise awareness for youth homelessness in Canada. But he'll be returning to Greater Vancouver to continue his trek, stopping in Cloverdale on Sept. 23 and ending at the Vancouver Public Library on Sept. 29. (Curtis McDonald photo)