

Former homeless youth pushing for change

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9/11/2017



Joe Roberts has come a long way from living on the streets of Vancouver's East Side.

After leaving home at the age of 15, he quickly found himself homeless and battling addiction.

"I didn't have the skill set to manage my life and I floundered ... It was a classic personal and systemic break down," he said. "I just became one of those statistics."

However, Roberts is one of the few that managed to escape that life. Ten years later, he was a successful businessman, the CEO of a multimedia company and on the cover magazines.

"Inside me was potential ... My story ended well because I had the stepping stones." But unfortunately, he said, many youth do not have the supports they need to turn their lives around or prevent them from ending up on the streets in the first place.

"There's two things we're not doing," he said. "Housing first and investment in prevention."

While there are many variations of the causes of youth homelessness, they're essentially broken down into four categories: early childhood trauma, running from conflict, addiction, and mental health struggles. "These can be addressed before a youth hits a piece of cardboard on the streets."

Now, Roberts is pushing a shopping cart across Canada in hopes of starting a conversation that will change perspectives and end youth homelessness. “Not everyone can walk across Canada but everyone can push for change,” he said. “Think locally and act nationally.”

He’s hoping his campaign, The Push for Change, will inspire youth empowerment and the social justice movement to target at risk kids and youth in schools, while they’re still a captive audience. In that setting, he added, those that have the potential to end up on the streets can be flagged and given the help they need.

But more conversation and a shift in perspective is required for that to happen and by pushing a shopping cart – a symbol often associated with homelessness – he’s hoping to start that.

“We need to create a possibility mindset,” Roberts explained. “We can get to a place ... where we rethink homelessness.”

He used the example of an emergency room, while you can get care there, it’s only temporary and not meant to be a long term fix. “They can treat you as best they can in emergency, but there’s still no bed upstairs and the waiting room is huge.”

Other than the personal connection, Roberts noted the campaign is aimed at youth because “if we deeply impact youth homelessness, we’ll in turn impact adult homelessness.”

Roberts will be pushing his shopping cart over the Malahat and into Langford late morning on Wednesday (Sept. 13). He’s more than a year into his journey and he’s already travelled more than 8,800 kilometres of the 9,220 km trip.

For more on his progress and the campaign, go to thepushforchange.com.

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“I started to share the experience,”