

# Homelessness crusade ends this month for Barrie advocate

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Marie and Joe Roberts pause for a moment in front of the mountains of British Columbia during their Push for Change cross-Canada tour. - Joe Roberts/Submitted



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The irony that he's currently homeless isn't lost on crusader Joe Roberts as he walks across Canada.

"The irony of being on the road for 17 months is that we've been voluntarily homeless," Roberts said as he nears the end of his Push for Change tour in Vancouver, B.C.

Roberts is a Barrie man creating awareness of youth homelessness, addiction and mental health while pushing a shopping cart across the country.

The Push for Change campaign started May 1, 2016, in St. John's, N.L., and has raised more than \$350,000.

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Born in Midland, Roberts moved to Barrie as a teen and became a drug addict. He landed in Vancouver, where he pushed a cart around collecting cans and bottles for cash, even selling his shoes for drugs.

He later cleaned up and became an entrepreneur, and is spreading awareness and raising funds to help other homeless kids in a similar situation.

"Some communities are ahead of the conversation," Roberts said. "I've talked to the mayor of Barrie, Jeff Lehman, who had a chance to walk with me and I learned about some of the things they're doing with new federal funding and getting more access to dollars for affordable housing."

He wants to inspire communities with his visit, but the long-term legacy he wants to create is sparking conversations about youth homelessness.

"I had a guy the other day, we were walking between Mission and Maple Ridge, B.C., he's towing these two jet skis. I thought he was mad at us. He came up to our driver really animated," he said. "He comes back with a tear in his eye and gave me a big hug. He said he was on the street eight years ago."

The stranger pulled five crisp \$20 bills and stuffed them into Roberts' hand.



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In Lake Louise, two girls came up to him with their parents, saying they had met Roberts when he visited their Ottawa school.

"That is the unique part of being on the road for 17 months, that we bump into people twice," Roberts said.

Walking through Canada has given him a different sense of national pride.

"The scenes on TV of wheat fields, the lighthouses, Niagara Falls, the CN Tower — I've walked past all those markers."

But that's not what makes Canada so great, Roberts said.

"As we celebrate Canada's 150, what makes us beautiful is our values, our lust for social justice. It's our willingness to roll up our sleeves and tackle social issues."

Roberts expects to conclude his trip Sept. 29, just a stone's throw from the bridge he used to sleep under.

Then he'll return home.

"I'm looking forward to being done. It's been more work than anything I've ever done, and my wife Marie poured her heart and soul into this," Roberts said. "We're looking forward to reclaiming our life back, our privacy."

He wants to curl up and watch sports on television, and also take a needed honeymoon to Hawaii and Australia.

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