

# A Walk for Homelessness and a Journey Across Native Land

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Joe Roberts

Joe Roberts has walked nearly 9,000 kilometres across Canada, through every kind of weather, to raise awareness on youth homelessness. Photo by The Push for Change.

What comes to mind when you imagine walking across Canada?

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If you ask Joe Roberts, he'll mention a hot bowl of chicken soup, a buttery piece of bannock and a curious wolf. He'll share stories of sacred gifts and territories that represent the diverse First Nations that stretch out in every direction.

Roberts, the face of [The Push for Change](#) social awareness campaign, is nearing the Sept. 29 end of an epic, 9,100-kilometre national trek to raise awareness on youth homelessness in Canada. The journey, which started in St. John's, N.L. on May 1, 2016, ends in downtown Vancouver. The final destination is intentional.

Roberts, 46, lived homeless from 1986-1989 in the Downtown Eastside in some of the most difficult years of his life. When he finally got off the streets, he dedicated his life to talking about how vulnerable people end up on the street and what needs to be done for people to be able to get up and out.

"We look at root causes of homelessness," Roberts said on the phone while walking in Victoria.

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He wears a bright yellow vest and pushes a shopping cart that he said represents chronic homelessness. "Mental health realities, addictions, trauma, these are all core issues of a person being at a higher risk of being street involved."

Roberts said when he left an abusive household at 15, no one chased after him. He didn't think of himself as homeless at the time. He ended up using heroine to relieve his pain, and his life spiralled out of control from there, he said.

If it weren't for his mother, support workers and friends, he said, he wouldn't have made it off the street and begun his career as a motivational speaker. But Roberts made it clear that not everyone who lives on the street has access to the same kind of support that saved his life.

"We have children who come from intergenerational trauma, the worst violence you can imagine, stuck up here,

sucked in and spit out,” he said. “Heroin can be the only thing that makes the pain go away and if we want to say it’s anyone’s fault they end up on the street, well that’s just ignorance.”

Roberts said that message relates well to a number of places he has visited on the journey.

Roberts has visited 10 provinces and engaged three territories, with scheduled events along the way. He has reached out to Indigenous communities whose territories he crossed, asking for permission to visit and say hello. He said he wouldn’t go anywhere he wasn’t invited.

“When we crossed Kenora into Manitoba, the Treaty 3 police service chief Louie Napish and First Nations elder Allan White brought drums and gifted me with a thunderbird star blanket,” he said.

He closed his time in Ontario in a blanketing ceremony by the Kenora Chiefs Advisory, which provides culturally appropriate health and social services. “It was emotional. I have felt like a cultural spectator for a long time, but to be personally honoured like that... it felt like a great blessing.”

Chief Louie Napish told Roberts that he was honoured in that way because he was considered a leader in the cause he was fighting and because the community cared about him.

851px version of Joe Roberts

‘When we tell our stories in a powerful and transparent way, people can relate and connect,’ Joe Roberts says. Photo by The Push for Change.

He received other sacred gifts and medicines along the way, including sage, sweetgrass, dream catchers, ceremonial tobacco and an eagle feather from by an elder he met in Winnipeg. But Roberts was blessed and followed by others who were also intrigued by his journey.

In Newfoundland one day, he was hit with wind and rain. His spirit was low, and his body exhausted. He stumbled across a massive eagle feather, about 18 inches long. He said he knew it was a message of strength and hope, the same message he tried to bring to the communities he visited across the country.

“Hope is the electricity we need to keep going,” he said.

During his crossing of Manitoba, he was followed one day by a young wolf for about seven kilometres. The wolf stayed behind him at a distance and occasionally poked out silent and still from the trees.

“When you get a chance to walk and slow down, you learn a lot about the place, the people, the country,” he reflected. “The entire way, I have felt that I have God at my back.”

Roberts said it’s not just the land that makes this country beautiful, it’s the people.

In Michipicoten, an Ojibwe First Nation in northern Ontario, Robert had reached out to a chief about his impending visit. When he and his team arrived, there was a hot bowl of chicken soup and a fluffy piece of bannock waiting for them.

“It’s impossible not to meet the Indigenous people of this land,” Roberts said. “My regret is that we don’t connect to hundreds of more communities.”

Roberts visited Mississauga First Nation near Blind River, Ontario, where he was honoured to meet chief Reg Niganobe. As a “white guy,” Roberts said he was surprised to see that the chief was wearing jeans and a T-shirt.

“I thought, is he really a chief?” Roberts laughed. “I had this preconception, you know?”

Roberts was invited into the local elementary school in the Nation, where they met a room full of wide-eyed children. He said they shared their stories and spoke about positive change.

“That was one of those moments,” he said.

1200px version of Joe Roberts

‘Long after this walk across Canada is over, we got 30 years of advocacy ahead of us. It’s going to take a couple generations,’ says Joe Roberts, who was gifted a blanket in Kenora. Photo by The Push for Change.

He’ll bring these moments, memories and relationships to the Native Friendship Centre on Hastings on September 29, and then the Vancouver Public Library’s central branch for the trip’s grand finale from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Everyone is welcomed and encouraged to join in the celebration and larger conversation, he said. Half of the funds raised in Vancouver will be donated to [Directions Youth Services](#), to support youth homelessness and prevention initiatives.

“It’s going to be emotional. That’s my old community,” he said. “I arrived in ‘86 and got out in ‘89. I had friends who never made it out, who ended up on (Robert) Pickton’s pig farm, in federal institutions or dead.”

Roberts said The Push for Change social awareness campaign support groups like [A Way Home](#) and the [Canadian Observatory on Homelessness](#), which study the issue and advocate for policy change.

Roberts ends his walk with optimism. He was encouraged by the many Canadians along the way who he said are deeply invested in social justice. He also noted a \$11.2-billion spending [plan](#) for affordable housing, announced by Finance Minister Bill Morneau in March. It’s the largest housing plan of its kind in 20 years, he said.

“The governments are hungry for change, they’re moving forward,” he said. “But they don’t always know what to do or how to do it.”

851px version of Joe Roberts

Day 442 of the 517-day journey. Photo by The Push for Change.

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