

Man making lengthy push to end homelessness

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COMING NORTH – Joe Roberts, seen on the road near Field, B.C., is due in Whitehorse on Sept. 7.

Joe Roberts knows what it's like to live on the streets of Vancouver.

By **Stephanie Waddell** on **August 29, 2017**

Joe Roberts knows what it's like to live on the streets of Vancouver.

Now a successful businessman, Roberts is getting set to finish up a journey that has taken him across the country.

He has been pushing a shopping cart in an effort to raise awareness and money for efforts aimed at ending youth homelessness.

On Sept. 7, Roberts will bring his Push For Change campaign to Whitehorse.

The Yukon isn't directly on the cross-country route spanning St. John's to Vancouver.

It is, however, one of a number of off-route locations he is visiting along the way to ensure his message reaches all regions of the country.

Other areas off the route that he's visited include North Grenville, Ont.; Saskatoon and Prince Albert in Saskatchewan; Edmonton and Yellowknife.

Though there aren't any communities in Nunavut that he's visited, as he explained in an interview last Friday, he remains hopeful that can happen.

"We wanted this to be a truly Canadian trek," he said.

Community organizations have partnered with his campaign to host Roberts in each community; however, such an organization has yet to be found in Nunavut.

In Whitehorse, groups partnering on Roberts' visit include UA local 310, the Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition, Skookum Jim Friendship Centre, Boys and Girls Clubs of Yukon, Inner Vibe and the territory's Department of Health and Social Services.

"I think it's important to be grassroots," Roberts said of working with local organizations in the communities he visits.

Roberts set out on his journey on May 1, 2016.

"It's been an amazing (480-plus) days," he told the Star.

"You don't have to convince Canadians to do good. The response has been extraordinary."

In each community he has visited and with people he's met along the way, he's shared his experience that saw him living on the streets of Vancouver when he was just a teenager.

Roberts left home and the small B.C. town he'd grown up at 15 and headed for Vancouver.

By the time he was 19, he was an addict.

He was also a member of that city's chronically homeless population, pushing a cart and collecting bottles and cans for cash.

Asked how he was able to get off the streets, Roberts quickly noted: "I had champions."

When he was ready, his mother took him back in, and he was able to access drug and alcohol treatment programs.

Essentially, he said, he had access to resources he needed when he was ready to access them.

There are essentially four causes of youth homelessness, he said, adding that the issues are often intertwined.

They can include traumatic childhood experiences, family conflict, mental health issues and addictions.

Working to help those youth means working toward tailored solutions, particularly for Indigenous youth, Roberts said.

It's that message Roberts is bringing with him as he travels across the country while also sharing his experience getting off of the street with youth who are homeless.

Speaking with youth is especially important for Roberts, and has been one of the most rewarding parts of the walk.

During those presentations, he works to share a positive mindset and let the youth know it's possible to change their lives.

A visit to Montreal was especially emotional, as a young homeless man told him he wanted to walk with him.

Initially, Roberts had thought the youth meant he wanted to join him in the walk locally.

He soon found out that the young man was hoping to join his campaign by walking the remainder of the cross-country journey with him.

While the logistics just didn't work for that to happen, Roberts was able to spend a day with the youth and share more of his experience with him before moving on.

Now in B.C., Roberts is set to visit the territory Sept. 7.

While here, he will do a walk from the Healing Totem on Front Street at 4:30 p.m. before he shares his story at the Kwanlin Dün Cultural Centre at 6 p.m.

Prior to his presentation, there will be a complimentary dinner at 5:30 p.m. Local entertainment will be included at the event.

Funds raised locally will go toward creating and implementing a program aimed at youth transitioning to independence.

Money will also go into The Upstream Project. That national initiative supports community school-based strategies to reduce the number of young people who become homeless.

Roberts' journey is expected to reach its final destination in Vancouver at the end of September.