

Joe Roberts' cross-country walk for homelessness reaches its last stop

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A man who lived on the streets of Vancouver as a teenager will push a shopping cart through the city's rough-and-tumble Downtown Eastside once again on Friday, but this time will mark the end of a cross-country journey to raise awareness about youth homelessness.

Joe Roberts, 50, began The Push For Change campaign in Newfoundland 17 months ago to visit schools and communities to discuss the issues that lead to youth homelessness and raise funds to support prevention programs.

Having gone from being a homeless teen to finding success in business and technology in a 12-year span, Mr. Roberts said he decided to leave the corporate world in the early 2000s to do workshops and help people understand why some youths end up on the street.

"I represent all the key antecedents that create the phenomena of youth homelessness in this country," he said in an interview. "I had early childhood trauma ... I had the early introduction to alcohol and drugs to deal with the emotional instability in my life.

"By the time I was 15, I had family conflict, which is the No. 1 reason why kids end up homeless."

Mr. Roberts said his father died while he was growing up in Midland, Ont. He later experimented with drugs, dropped out of school, left home and headed to Vancouver.

Living on the streets of the Downtown Eastside, he said he called his mother, who tracked him down and brought him home.

As he struggled with mental-health issues, Mr. Roberts said he finally connected with the right treatment after the Ontario Provincial Police de-escalated a suicide attempt.

Mr. Roberts would go on to complete his education and eventually return to Vancouver and establish a technology company.

"I was able to get that second break I needed," he said.

"When I came back the second time, with some foundation and sobriety under my belt, I succeeded beyond my wildest dreams in the business community."

Looking back on that time, Mr. Roberts said there were many key moments at which interventions could have prevented homelessness.

He decided to support the charity Raising The Roof because it connects youth with supports before they wind up on the street.

Mr. Roberts said he wanted to push a shopping cart across the country as a symbol of chronic homelessness.

Because his route meant dealing with unpaved highway shoulder in the winter, he worked with Vancouver high-school students to design a cart that uses a more durable baby stroller as its base.

The cart survived the journey with only two or three wheel replacements along the way. Mr. Roberts said the ice and snow he encountered around Lake Superior through February and March posed the greatest challenge, but the stories of the young people he met along the way kept him going.

The Push For Change has raised more than \$540,000 in addition to the sponsorships that covered the costs of the campaign. Mr. Roberts also spoke at hundreds of schools, met with mayors, police departments, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and government officials. "We're moving in the right direction," he said, adding that he'll continue promoting the issue after the walk is over on Friday.