

Pushing for Change coming to Barrie

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Joe Roberts, left, and Jaime Orozco, the van driver for the Push for Change, are shown near Ingersoll. Roberts is pushing a shopping cart as he walks across Canada to raise awareness and funds to help troubled youth. Roberts will be in Barrie at the Southshore Centre on Tuesday. SUBMITTED

Pushing a wonky shopping cart across the tiled floor of a grocery store can set most people's teeth on edge.

Joe Roberts has taken it many steps further by pushing his shopping cart across Canada in an effort to raise money for youth who are facing difficulties in their lives.

Roberts began his 9,000 kilometre walk on May 1 in St. John's N.L., and hopes to finish Sept. 30, 2017 in Vancouver, B.C., where he lived on the streets as a drug-addicted youth in the 1980s.

"I was quite disengaged at a young age and very awkward in high school," Roberts said as he walked away from Kitchener Monday morning.

"There was a lot going on under the surface. Like many kids today, I suffered from anxiety and depression. I found acceptance in the drug culture," he said.

“Like many people, I sold myself short for the feeling of fitting in somewhere.”

Born and raised in the Barrie area, Roberts fled to Vancouver in 1986 and lived on the streets and under a bridge until 1989 when he returned home in an attempt to clean himself up.

While suffering through drug withdrawal, Roberts had a mental breakdown and was considering suicide by gun when Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) Const. Scott McLeod showed up at his mother’s house and helped him cope with the stress.

After a stint in rehab, Roberts turned his life around, and within a decade he’d bought a share in the Mindwave Design tech company and made it rich.

“My ‘aha’ moment was 12 years later, I was driving through the downtown east side of Vancouver in my 7 Series BMW and I saw a kid pushing a shopping cart. I got to work and I was on the cover of a business magazine and Macleans magazine had just named me as one of 10 Canadians who were making a difference,” Roberts said.

“I realized not everyone has a pathway out like I did, so I started the Push for Change walk in an attempt to reach the kids while we still have them captive in high school,” he said, pushing his cart along the outskirts of Kitchener, where the temperature was a balmy minus 7 Celsius.

Roberts begins his days at 5 a.m. and walks 24 kms before finishing at approximately 1 p.m. and then he’ll often visit schools or community centres to speak about his reasons for walking.

With 4,335 kms walked and another 4,665 to go before reaching his destination, Roberts will be making his way to Barrie Dec. 27., when he will meet up with Mayor Jeff Lehman at the Zehrs at Big Bay Point Road and Yonge Street and walk to the Southshore Community Centre for a presentation.

Throughout the walk, the OPP has played a major role, helping raise awareness about the risk factors associated with homeless youth.

OPP Comm. Vince Hawkes said he believes Roberts’ walk gives police an opportunity to speak about troubled youth.

“The Push for Change is a perfect opportunity to engage with community stakeholders and partners to spread awareness about homeless youth and help mitigate the underlying risk factors that lead to the vulnerability of homelessness,” Hawkes said.

With a goal of \$18 million, Roberts said sponsors are funding his trek across Canada and 50% of donations made will stay in the community.

The remainder will go to the national coalition called A Way Home to fund its Upstream Project.

“They are the thinkers behind what we do,” he said. “They know to end homelessness it’s not about bowls of soup and a sleeping bag.”

Roberts said to end youth homelessness, Canadians must invest in prevention.

“If you don’t, you’ll never put the fire out,” he said.

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