



Photo by KEVIN McSHEFFREY/THE STANDARD Marie and Joe Roberts, organizers of the Push for Change campaign, were joined by students at Ésc Jeunesse Nord, École St. Joseph, Blind River Public School and St. Mary's School on Jan. 25 in Blind River.

Joe Roberts, whose quest is to make Canadians aware of youth homelessness and help raise funds to end it, made a stop in Blind River on his trans-Canada trek on Wednesday, Jan. 25.

Roberts stopped and spoke to dozens of students at WC Eaket Secondary School and at École secondaire catholique Jeunesse Nord about his Push for Change campaign.

When he entered the auditorium at Jeunesse Nord, the students from JN, École St. Joseph, Blind River Public School and St. Mary's School cheered and shouted several times "Push for Change."

Roberts told the students that in Canada there are an estimated 235,000 homeless people, of that 35,000 are between the ages of 13 and 24.

He says there are four core issues of youth homelessness: early childhood conflict, family conflict, addiction and mental illness, which can start by being made to feel one is worthless.

He also explained what homelessness is. He said it is not always a person living outdoors in a city, and sleeping under a highway overpass or in a cardboard box.

He said sometimes homelessness is sleeping at different friends' homes, which is also referred to as couch surfing. Homelessness also occurs in small towns, as well as large cities.

Roberts homeless

As a youth, Roberts spent several years homeless.

Now 50 years of age, Roberts grew up in a loving and caring home in Midland, Ontario.

“I was the last person in the world you would think would end up hooked on heroin and pushing a shopping cart in the downtown East side of Vancouver. I came from a good place. I had a great mom and an awesome father.”

Then, at the age of 35, his father died suddenly; Roberts was just eight years old. His father’s death put a massive financial strain on his mother, who was alone to raise three children.

“We went from having the bills paid to dealing with poverty, uncertainty and fear.”

His mother later remarried and he describes his stepfather at the time as a violent and abusive alcoholic. His stepfather constantly put him down to the point where he felt he was not good enough.

At the age of nine, he began taking drugs because he wanted to “belong.”

“That one bad choice led to almost 15 years of substance abuse.”

At the age of 15, he left home and a year later he quit school.

He then left the Midland area and headed to Vancouver, where he got much deeper into the drug culture.

“And I found myself increasingly, chronically homeless.”

By 1989, Roberts was living on the streets in Vancouver and hooked on heroin.

“I was pushing a shopping cart collecting cans and bottles. I made every mistake that I could possibly make, as a young person. I thought my life was over.”

“I was one of those sketched out disheveled guys you’d see in the inner city, walking around with clothes I’d be wearing for months, talking to myself. I would have made you nervous.”

His life on the street ended because his mother wouldn’t give up on him. She went to Vancouver and brought him back to Barrie.

However, he continued to struggle with his drug and alcohol addictions. One night she entered his room and found him with a gun, contemplating suicide. She called the police.

“But that night I met somebody who became a hero of mine. I met OPP Constable Scott MacLeod, and he defused a very dangerous situation.

“I was attempting to end my life and Scott helped me that night; he had compassion. He opened a doorway of opportunity for me.”

That night his life changed, a police officer saved his life. Roberts then got into a drug treatment program, and found the courage and the strength he needed to succeed. He eventually went to college, and graduated on the dean’s list.

He and a friend started a technology business. In less than 12 years, he became a very successful business entrepreneur. He appeared on the cover of Canadian Business magazine as a celebrated entrepreneur. He was then included in an edition of Maclean’s magazine.

“When I moved back to Vancouver, I was driving my BMW to work. I looked out my window as I drove through the downtown East side and I saw a kid pushing a shopping cart, and I realized how far I had come.”

Looking to help others

In 2011, he wanted to do something to prevent other young people from becoming homeless. He decided to share

his story in the hope of inspiring others to avoid ending up on the streets.

He mentioned his idea to a friend, who suggested that he run across Canada. Not being athletic, Roberts replied, "You run across Canada."

His friend then suggested he push a shopping cart, a symbol of homelessness, across Canada.

He and his wife Marie, campaign director, began working on the plan.

After five years of planning, he began the Push for Change campaign in St. John's, Newfoundland on May 1, 2016. He plans to complete his 17-month, 9,000-kilometre journey of the 10 provinces and three territories, in Vancouver, by Sept. 30, 2017.

He reached Blind River on Tuesday, Jan. 24, day 270 of a 517-day trip. He walks 24 kilometres per day and hit the 5,001-kilometre mark, leaving only 3,999 kilometres left. The OPP is helping to promote The Push For Change campaign.

Fundraising

The trek is also aimed at raising funds to help prevent youth homelessness.

Roberts says the funds raised all go to help organizations fight youth homelessness. Their charitable partner is Raising the Roof, and half of the money they raise goes to it.

"And 100% of that goes to support something called the 'Upstream Project,' which is a youth homeless prevention model. That was developed by A Way Home and The Homeless Hub."

He says they also leave some of the money to organizations in communities they pass through that have homeless shelters.

To date, through donations, Roberts says they have raised \$390,000.

To make a donation, check the website, www.thepushforchange.com.

He adds that he takes no money from the fundraiser; he and sponsors are covering the costs.

There will also be a national SleepOut Challenge on March 3, as a fundraiser and groups are encouraged to host such an event. The SleepOuts do not have to be outside, he says.

Information on the SleepOuts is also available on the website.