

Push for Change tackling youth homelessness in Canada

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As Joe Roberts pushed his shopping cart into the parking lot of the Home Hardware Building Centre on Willow Street, he had reached the 1,469 kilometre mark in his Push for Change campaign.

Roberts, his shopping cart and team are in the midst of a cross-country trek aimed at raising funds and awareness around youth homelessness. On July 12, the campaign rolled through Truro. Supporters joined Roberts at Victoria Square, walking with up Willow Street to the Home Hardware.

“The Push for Change is about supporting every young person across this country by giving them the tools they need to successfully transition into an adult,” Roberts told the crowd gathered in the parking lot. “The work we’re doing will impact some of those young lives and give them a key to the door of opportunity so they can walk through and find out what their life is all about.”

Roberts left St. John’s on May 1 which officially kicked off a 17-month, 9,000 kilometre journey which will end in Vancouver. He’s looking to raise \$17 million which would be used to prevent youth homelessness in the country.

Now a successful entrepreneur, life wasn't always that way for Roberts. As a teenager, he spent time on the streets.

"I was a young person who made a lot of mistakes and I was pushing a real shopping cart on the streets of Vancouver," he said. "I was a kid with all the potential in the world but I started making mistakes that would soon lead me to struggling with a drug and alcohol dependency. At the lowest point in my life, I ended up selling the shoes I had on my feet to support my habits. At that point, I never thought turning my life around would be possible."

Losing his father at an early age and dealing with an abusive stepfather also were factors in becoming homeless.

"I went from being a man who told me he loved me to a man who would tell me I was stupid, dumb and would never amount to anything," said Roberts. "If young people begin to believe lies about who they actually are, that will control the choices and decisions they make in life. The greatest opportunity we have as a society is to support these young people. It's a small group of people who need this help. The challenge is getting to them before they become homeless, before they are pushing a shopping cart and before they are sitting on a piece of cardboard in front of a liquor store."

Roberts gives credit for his turnaround to 'a mother who wouldn't quit on me and a police officer who was committed to changing the trajectory of my life.'

As a result, he dealt with his drug and alcohol dependency, returned to college and graduated with honours. He says he went from a man who was struggling, homeless and sleeping on the streets to the cover of MacLean's Magazine.

"I made the choice to seize the opportunity in front of me," said Roberts. "But one of the things I've thought about over the years is how many young people have the same possibility but they don't have my mother or that police officer. They have no one fighting for them. It's a thought that's kept me awake at night on many occasions."

The money generated will be allocated to Raising the Roof to fund the Upstream Project – a school based prevention framework to end youth homelessness.

During his stop in Truro – day 73 of his journey – Roberts was presented with a donation of \$5,448.30 on behalf of Home Hardware locations on Pictou Road and Willow Street.

Bethany Hagen was one of the community champions that helped bring Roberts to Truro.

"I feel the event went over great," she said. "We had lots of support from the community and a great turnout for the meet and greet with Joe and the Push for Change team. It's so important to help prevent, reduce and in the end have the possibility of ending youth

homelessness. By hosting the Push for Change event here in Truro, it helped educate children and the community about youth homelessness.”

Truro Mayor Bill Mills walked with Roberts and was happy to announce the town was also making a \$300 donation to the Push for Change campaign.



“We are more than happy to support the campaign while helping to raise awareness around youth homelessness in our own community and across Canada,” said Mills. “I want to congratulate Joe and his team on everything they’re doing to combat this issue.”

Philip Quigley of the Truro Homeless Outreach Society knows firsthand how homelessness can impact a community. The non-profit organization operates a year round shelter in Truro.

“When we first started, we weren’t sure it was a mountain we could climb,” said Quigley.

“We didn’t stop to consider Truro, Colchester County and the heart and energy that existed. Everyone who came out and walked with Joe has exemplified the heart of our town.”

Leading up to Roberts’ arrival, Home Hardware hosted a pair of fundraising events on July 9. The first was a Push for Change Relay at the TAAC Grounds where participants in the relay raced shopping carts around the track.

The second event involved staff members with Home Hardware Building Centre Willow Street and Pictou Road sleeping outside the Willow Street location as part of a SleepOut Challenge.

“One of the things that make our world better is when you give; when you give of yourself, your time, your treasure and your talent,” said Roberts. “We’ve been successful since leaving St. John’s because of the connections we are making along the way. Without all of these people, I’m just a guy with a shopping cart walking along the highway.”

For complete details or to support the campaign, visit www.thepushforchange.com.