

# Crusader for youth homelessness turned life around while studying at Loyalist

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## Push for Change

Stephen Petrick

*Joe Roberts and his wife Marie posed for a photo with Bay of Quinte MP Neil Ellis (left) and Belleville city councillor Garnet Thompson at Belleville's Market Square on Wednesday, Oct. 12. Roberts is in the midst of the Push for Change, a cross-Canada trek to raise funds to end youth homelessness.*



**Belleville** – Joe Roberts' trek into Belleville on Wednesday, Oct. 12 was much different than the one he took a quarter century ago.

When he first came to Belleville in 1992, he was a young man trying to turn his life around after having lived on the streets of Vancouver, B.C.

This time, he came with huge fanfare, as he's now one of Canada's most famous champions for battling youth homelessness.

Roberts is in the midst of a cross-country trek to raise money to fight youth homelessness and his Belleville stop on Wednesday -- Day 165 of the 517-day journey -- was symbolic. Belleville represents the city that turned his life around, he said, as an opportunity to attend Loyalist College, where he studied business marketing and business sales, sent him in the right direction.

"I'm feeling nostalgic," said Roberts, standing at Belleville's Market Square where he would speak about his cross-Canada mission, called the Push for Change.

"I'm certainly not the same man who came here 25 years ago."

Although originally from Barrie, Roberts moved to Vancouver in the mid 1980s to flee an abusive situation at home. By 1989 he was battling addictions and living on what he called "skid row" in Vancouver.

Eventually though, he sought help to overcome his addictions. On the advice of his mother he came home to Ontario and entered Serenity House, a Belleville-based addictions treatment centre.

By the winter semester in 1992, he was ready to attend Loyalist and work on his business skills -- something he had developed at an early age and was actually finding useful while fighting for survival on the streets. He would eventually graduate with an average in the high threes and go on to a successful career in business.

He became the CEO of a multi-media company, Mindware Design Communications, but retired from the business world in 2003 to become a professional motivational speaker.

The Push for Change is a new direction for Roberts. After planning the trek for two years with his wife, Marie, the couple put together a team to start the march on May 1 from Cape Spear, near St. John's, Newfoundland.

It's expected to continue for another year, as Roberts intends to finish in Vancouver by next September. "He'll walk in the winter," Marie said.

During the trek, Roberts has been pushing a shopping cart, with a sign that says "supporting the end of youth homelessness" and seeking donations. People can donate cash at public events he's staging along the way or donate through his website, [www.thepushforchange.com](http://www.thepushforchange.com).

Roberts' main charity of choice is Raising the Roof, a national charity dedicated to finding long-term solutions to homelessness. However, at public events, 50 per cent of funds raised are going to Raising the Roof and the other 50 per cent is intended for local causes.

John Wendling, a person involved in organizing Roberts' Belleville stop, said details are still being worked out to determine which local groups should benefit from funds raised at Wednesday's stop.

He added that the group involved are examining a number of organization that work with homeless youth, such as Youthhab, Nightlight and Grace Inn.

Wendling wanted to be involved in the project because he's an old classmate of Roberts, from Loyalist back in the 1990s.

Wendling said when the two were classmates he knew of Roberts' troubled past, but he had no idea at the time that he'd go on to become a well-known motivational speaker and champion for the fight against homelessness.

"If you follow the whole story, it's pretty amazing," he said.

Back then, the signs of Roberts' past street life were visible, Wendling said, replete with long, scruffy hair. "He was still getting his act together."

Upon graduation he kept in touch with Roberts and eventually learned about his intentions to launch the Push for Change. That's why Wendling felt it was important to be at Market Square on Wednesday, as part of a crowd to meet the fundraiser.

"I think it's important that Belleville supports him," he said. "This is where he got his legs and he got clean."

Now, a month shy of his 50th birthday, Roberts is fit and happy. He's also pleased to offer insight and how to stop homelessness issues.

He said his transformation didn't happen overnight. It was the result of him being given access to the right people and right support systems. Those same support systems must be in place for today's youth, if youth homelessness is to end, he said.

He added that when many people see a young person panhandling on the street, they may be tempted to judge, but they shouldn't.

"Not many people ask, 'How did he get there?'" Roberts said. "It's not a behavioural issue. It's a systemic failure."