

Joe Roberts on the road to North Grenville

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Joe Roberts walks across Canada with a shopping cart. Photo courtesy of Push for Change

Article: Courtesy of The Wrench, Ottawa

by Naomi Harris

As of August 9th, Joe Roberts, the co-founder of the charitable organization, Push for Change (PFC), is in Woodstock, New Brunswick, on his journey from the East coast of Canada to the West.

This is just over 2000 km into his 9000 km journey from St. John, Newfoundland to Vancouver, British Columbia. Roberts started this walk on May 1st 2016 and will end it on September 30th 2017. This trek will span 517 days, 10 provinces and three territories. PFC

also plans to attend over 400 community events to spread awareness about youth poverty and homelessness.

Roberts chose to focus on youth poverty having formerly experienced homelessness when he left home at the age of 15. During 1989, when he was 19, he lived under a bridge in Vancouver's downtown eastside addicted to heroin and pushing around a shopping cart to collect cans to support his addiction. In an article Roberts wrote on the Homeless Hub website he says, "For years I struggled and could not seem to break the cycle of addiction, poverty and homelessness by myself."

Roberts sees himself as fortunate because he had a loving, supportive mother and police officer who cared about him enough to help him safely transition off the streets. He knows that this is not the case for most homeless teens. Not all homeless teens are provided with the chance to receive an education that could guarantee them a long-term successful career after their transition off the streets, like he did he realizes.

After Roberts transitioned off the streets, he went to a detox centre then to a rehabilitation center in Ontario. While he was there he questioned his motives for leaving home, evaluated his choices and figured out where he went wrong. Afterwards he attended college, graduating with honours and became a successful entrepreneur.

Affected by his experiences of homelessness Roberts wanted to make a difference with the Canadian youth, to keep them empowered and off the streets. He began to look at the roots of youth homelessness realizing that the Canadian system has failed.

First in schools, Roberts states that, "There were a number of measurable things that began to change: attendance, discipline issues and grades dropping." He also pointed out that, "Any teacher, counsellor or coach I was in contact with would have known something was not working."

Second, when Roberts had left home at the age of 15, this went unaddressed. He realized that this was a huge problem because he was a child trying to survive in the world as an adult, only having the experience of a child.

Third, Roberts blames the justice system. With the amount of times he was in and out of the justice system, he thought that intervention and rehabilitation should have been the solution to stop what had become, "the train wreck" of his life.

This is how Push for Change started. The idea of crossing the country with a shopping cart to raise awareness to the issue of youth homelessness has two goals. The goal of raising money for the Upstream Project to fight against youth homelessness and to start dialogue about the issue in order to influence systemic changes.

The Upstream Project is targeted towards youth homelessness by integrating the community into the school system. Most youth have experienced schooling at one point. There is a three step process that the project hopes to incorporate: to identify students who are at risk of homelessness, to provide services to families who have students that may be at risk and to incorporate this system across the country.

It is Roberts's personal goal to ensure that "every young person deserves to grow up and transition safely into adulthood." He believes that the greatest and most cost-effective way to keep the youth off the streets is to prevent it from ever happening.

In a research paper done by the Homeless Hub, it states that homeless youth have a 40 times higher mortality rate than their peers who are not homeless. The same study states that 20% of homeless people are youth between the ages of 16 - 24, most of these youth coming from emotional, physical or sexually abusive homes.

These stats point to how vital Push for Change is to Canada's approach to homelessness. For systemic changes to occur there must be an active dialogue about this issue first.