

Nationwide Push for Change enters city

thepeterboroughexaminer.com/2016/10/16/nationwide-push-for-change-enters-city



Joe Roberts pushes a shopping cart toward The Mount Community Centre on Sunday. Roberts is pushing the cart across Canada to raise funds and awareness to prevent youth homelessness. Jessica Nyznik/Examiner

Joe Roberts wants to see an end to youth homelessness in Canada.

As someone who once lived on the streets, Roberts doesn't want kids to see the same fate.

So he's pushing for change, literally.

The Push for Change campaign has Roberts, 49, pushing a shopping cart across Canada to raise awareness and funds to prevent youth homelessness.

He's walking 9,000 kilometres from St. John's, Newfoundland to Whitehorse, Yellowknife in 517 days.

His trek started in May and finishes in September 2017.

At 169 days and about 3,250 km into his journey, Roberts stopped in Peterborough at The Mount Community Centre on Sunday.

He shared his story and his vision for change with about 50 people during Yes Shelter for Youth and Families' annual United Way fundraiser.

Roberts grew up in Vancouver, B.C.

He left home at 15, quit school a year later and fell into drugs as he struggled with mental illness.

Thanks to his mom and an OPP officer, Roberts got a second chance and got off the streets.

About a decade later, he was on the cover of Canadian Business for his Internet content development company.

“In less than 12 years, I went from pushing a shopping cart to being a celebrated entrepreneur,” said Roberts, who now lives in Barrie.

If he hadn’t had the support of his mother and the OPP officer, Roberts said he doesn’t know where he’d be today.

Before Roberts ended up on the streets, he said it was clear that he was headed for trouble, and teachers, principals and guidance counsellors could all see it.

Yet he still ended up there.

That’s why Roberts thinks kids need to be helped while they’re still sitting in the classroom, so they don’t fall through the cracks.

And understanding the causes behind youth homelessness is the first step.

While addiction and mental health play a part in why kids drop out of school and leave home, 67 per cent of homeless young people have experienced family conflict.

Roberts said systems need to be in place allowing youth to access the resources they need to help them cope before it’s too late.

Right now, those systems are in “silos” so access isn’t always easy, especially in rural communities.

“We need to collapse those down and create a better collaborative model,” he said.

Roberts plans to invest funds raised during The Push for Change into a school-based homeless prevention model.

He’s hoping the government will get on board, investing with the cause and approving the models to create long-term sustainable solutions.

“If we don’t, what we’re looking at is a problem that has no sunset.”

NOTE: For more information about The Push for Change, or to donate, go to www.thepushforchange.com

JNyznik@postmedia.com