

Push for Change campaign stopping in Caledon

By Bill Rea

Joe Roberts spent part of his youth living under a bridge and pushing a shopping cart in Vancouver; homeless.

He realizes he was one of the lucky ones to escape that life style, and today he's spreading that message.

Roberts, 50, is pushing a shopping cart across Canada in his Push for Change campaign, and his trip is to bring him to Caledon today (Thursday). He's expected at Town Hall in Caledon East at 8 a.m., where he expects to be greeted by Mayor Allan Thompson and Town staff, representatives of Caledon OPP and students from Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School.

The journey started May 1 in St. John's Newfoundland, and the cross-country trek is slated to take 17 months. He said he's averaging 24 kilometres per day.

"We're going really, really good," he said yesterday (Wednesday) morning, as he was making his way into Erin, where he was expecting to be greeted by local officials, including OPP, and visit some area schools.

Roberts grew up in Barrie and Midland, but ended up homeless in Vancouver. He was lucky in that he was able to get help from his mother and an OPP officer, and that enabled him to complete high school in Ontario.

"Had I not had those people and supports, I wouldn't be successful," he said.

He went back to Vancouver and found success operating a technology company.

"Now I spend my time doing youth advocacy," he said.

As Roberts pushes his cart, he has a community safety partnership with OPP. As well, there is a van accompanying him with a full-time driver and support person. His wife Marie is also long on the trip.

"We rely a lot of community partnerships," he said. "The OPP is engaged with us in these communities. It is at the heart of their community policing model."

According to the Push for Change campaign website (www.thepushforchange.com), there are some 65,000 young people in Canada who are homeless or living in shelters, and the number is growing.

"I was kind of unlucky that homelessness ever needed to happen in Canada," he said. "Homelessness is a big problem because we don't engage in prevention."

Roberts is convinced the Push for Change campaign is having an impact, as it's helping to drive home the message of what homelessness is and isn't.

"We will get our message across to hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people," he commented.