



# The Chronicle Herald

**CEO from Skid Row: Addict-turned millionaire shares story**



Joe Roberts was once homeless and is now a millionaire businessman and motivational speaker. He is in Halifax to speak at the Brunswick Street Mission's annual Mission Breakfast fundraiser on Wednesday. (INGRID BULMER / Staff)

Joe Roberts, known as the Skid Row CEO, went from living under a bridge in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in 1989 to becoming a Canadian millionaire before he turned 35.

The former heroin addict and street person went on to become a company president and CEO with help from a loving mother and street-based agencies.

"My story ends well but the truth is not all stories like mine end well," Roberts said in an interview Tuesday.

An author and professional speaker, Roberts motivates and inspires audiences worldwide with his message about turning setbacks into an opportunity.

Roberts, 47, is in Halifax this week to speak at the Brunswick Street Mission's 7th Annual Mission Breakfast on Wednesday at the World Trade and Convention Centre.

Funds raised from the breakfast provide food, clothing, shelter and aid to over 5,000 people in the Halifax area each year. The mission serves 60-100 people breakfast daily. In 2012, volunteers served 16,800 hot breakfasts and gave groceries to 1,300 people.

"The important thing is that people need, and thanks to the support of people who come to breakfasts like this, we meet that need," Sandra Nicholas, executive director of the Brunswick Street Mission, said Tuesday.

The annual event brings together the business and church community for a dialogue on addressing poverty.

"The work that Brunswick does is incredibly important," Roberts said. "At the end of the day, I don't think it's your net worth that determines whether you deserve dignity. And, so having a place like this is, I think, maybe not for all, but for some it's a starting point."

Roberts grew up in Midland, Ont., in a typical middle-class family.

But when he was eight-years-old his 35-year-old father died of a heart attack. His father's death was a defining moment for Roberts.

"We went from having a dad who was a hero, to the man who would come to replace him (who) was an abusive alcoholic," Roberts recalled.

At the age of nine, with so many bad things going on at home, Roberts began using drugs and that pattern continued for the next 15 years of his life.

At 15, Roberts left home and ended up in jail a year later for drug possession and theft.

“I was just living outside the boundaries of our legal system, if you will,” he said. “It was probably more related to a life being an active drug addict than anything else.”

After he was released from jail at 17, he hopped on a bus, left Ontario, and wound up on the streets of Vancouver where he went from being a young man who dabbled with soft drugs and alcohol to an intravenous drug user. He soon found himself addicted to heroin.

That lasted until 1991 when he finally got sober.

“So what happened for me is I finally hit bottom, living in East Vancouver (where) I was one of those people you see pushing a shopping cart around,” Roberts said.

He collected cans and lived under a bridge. When Roberts hit his lowest point, he reached out for help.

A street-based agency helped connect him with his mother who came to Vancouver and returned with her son to Ontario to begin his recovery.

During his recovery, Roberts, a high school dropout, returned to school to study marketing in sales at Loyalist College in Belleville. He graduated at the top of his class with a 3.94 GPA.

“So I started to excel, I started to do really well and I started to really discover this dormant side of me that I never knew existed,” he said.

After graduation, he took a risk and moved back to Vancouver where his brother lived, but this time with a different mission. It was there that Roberts got his first job in sales.

And he said there were transferable skills that he had learned from his time living on the streets. “So the gift of the gab, if you will, and my ability to engage with people really lent (themselves) well for a career in sales and I started to really excel,” he said.

In 1997, he went on to build a small website development company at the edge of the dot-com explosion. Within four years, the business turned into a multimillion-dollar company.

“And so what happened is I literally went from being the guy who pushed a shopping cart around the Downtown Eastside to being on the cover of Maclean’s magazine in less than 11 years,” he said.

Roberts left that world in 2003 because it was no longer fulfilling. “I made the money, I found the success and it was empty.”

That year, he decided that he wanted to teach his life’s mantra that there is more in each and every one of us than we can see.

Since then, he has dedicated his life to motivational speaking around the world. And through The Push for Change, a charity he started in 2011 with his business partner, Dr. Sean Richardson, he also helps at-risk youth.

For more information on Roberts and the Brunswick Street Mission, see [www.thepushforchange.com](http://www.thepushforchange.com) and [www.brunswickstreetmission.org](http://www.brunswickstreetmission.org).