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CANADIANS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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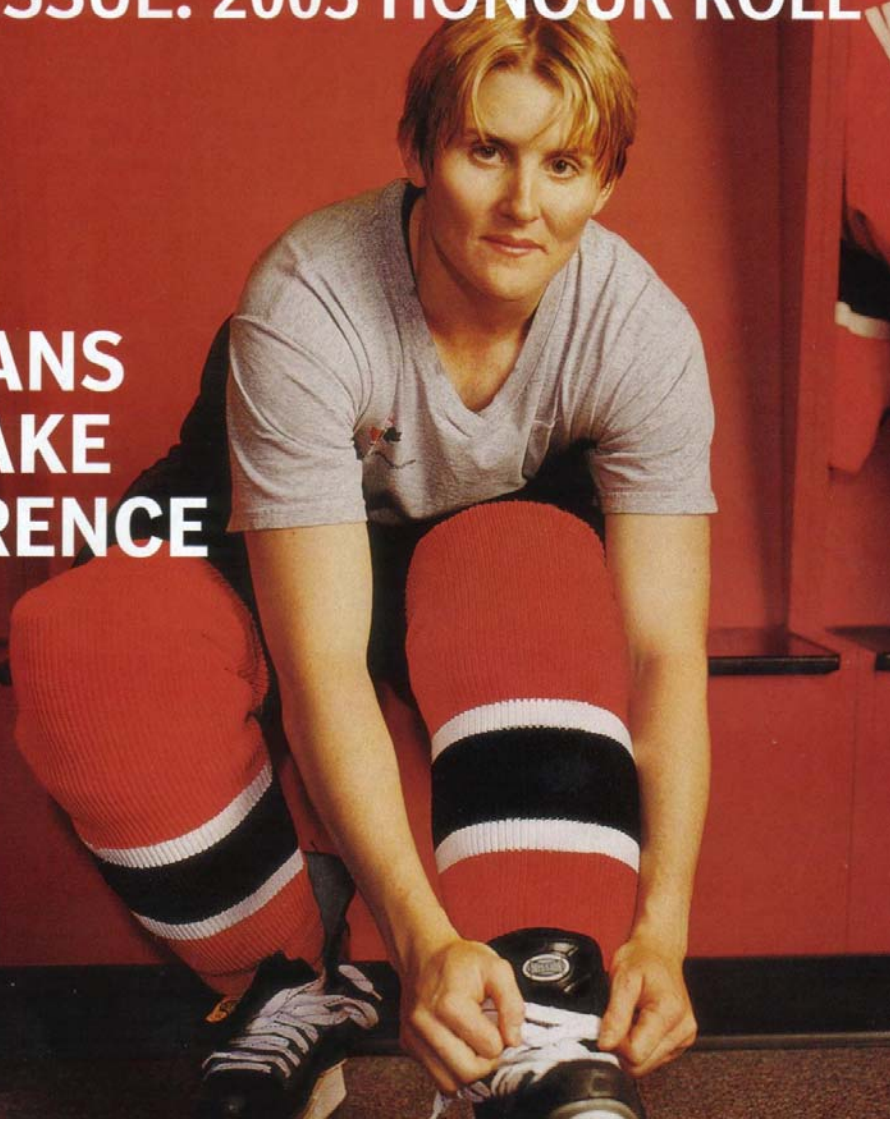
SONIA LUPIEN

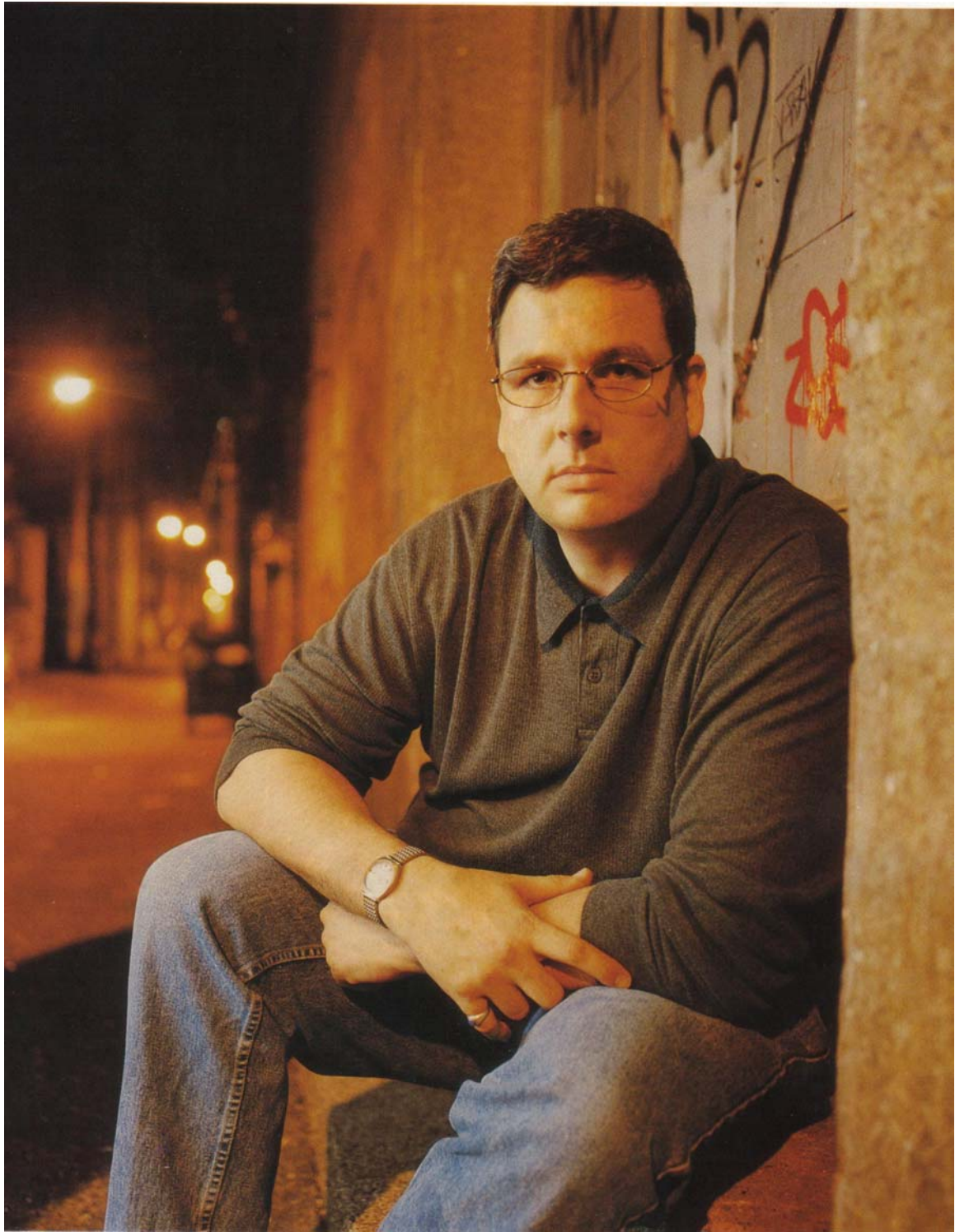
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JOE ROBERTS

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HAYLEY WICKENHEISER





JOE ROBERTS

'Being a drug addict for 15 years, you learn to become extremely creative'

THE INTERVIEW is almost over when Joe Roberts points to a picture of an elegant automobile on the office wall of his Coquitlam, B.C., home. It's a goal. Roberts runs on goals. Always has. "I want to be the first drug addict/business guy to have a Rolls-Royce," he says. He's not there yet, but don't count him out. When you're 36, and you've tossed 15 years of your life into a dumpster, you've got some catching up to do.

The Roberts of today—Joe the CEO, a suburban husband and dad with the go-get-'em grin—is almost unrecognizable in the pictures from his past. Those photos—pre-July 26, 1991, the day he declared himself clean—show a drug-addled wild man, rail-thin and angry. "Basically," he says, "I was dying."

He grew up in Midland, Ont. His father died of a heart attack when Roberts was eight. A year later he was using drugs, his downward spiral deepened by an abusive stepfather. "The home," he says, "was a Jerry Springer show." By 22, he was homeless in Vancouver, often sleeping under the Georgia Street viaduct near the Downtown Eastside. "I was as bad as anything down there. I was vile, I was corrupt. I was a shell of a person."

His mother, Arlene Quesnelle, coaxed him back to Ontario, but alcohol and injection drugs led to a collapse, and a brutal stint in a detox program. "I prayed like crazy for him," his mother says today. "He's my miracle."

It was a long climb back. "I learned how to wash my hair and brush my teeth," he says. "I learned how to speak without swearing." He learned the value of a 12-step program. He studied business at an Ontario college, and

moved back to B.C. This time, he got it right.

He got his start selling photocopiers, a lot of them. "He's got the gift of the gab," Quesnelle says. "I always knew he'd be a salesman. But I didn't know he was going to sell drugs before he sold something decent." Those days, when the only goal was chasing a high, left some "transferable skills," he concedes. "Being a drug addict for 15 years, figuring out a way how it's going to happen again today the way it happened yesterday, you learn to become extremely creative." Today, he co-owns Mindware Design Communications, which creates new media information strategies. He points to a CD-ROM for the Canadian Bar Association. "It's ironic, some of the clients I have today."

In the past five years Roberts met and married his wife, Jennifer, becoming a stepfather to her 10-year-old daughter, Sarah. The couple is expecting a child this fall. Roberts put his hard-earned respectability at risk by going public with his recovery. He's written a book, *7 Secrets to Profit from Adversity*, and launched a second business as a motivational speaker. This spring, B.C.'s Coast Mental Health Foundation gave him its Courage to Come Back Award for overcoming chemical dependency.

Roberts also volunteers to tell his story in area schools. Recently, it was a Grade 11 class in Surrey. The students' typical skepticism and wisecracks drained away as they realized this unlikely business guy has survived things they don't ever want to see. He likes to think he's steered a few kids from disaster. The mere hope of that is part of what keeps him clean and sober—and driving toward his goals. KEN MACQUEEN

Joe Roberts in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside