

From Skid Row to High Street: CEO uses past experiences to become business success, help others

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Joe Roberts trains for his cross-Canada walk to draw attention to homeless, at-risk youth. Courtesy Joe Roberts

Joe Roberts was living on the streets of Vancouver, sleeping under the Georgia Viaduct, cadging meals from the Salvation Army. He was a mooch, a thief and a heroin addict. His greatest ambition was to collect enough bottles and cans every day to earn \$10 for a hit to keep the shakes away for one more night.

Roberts grew up in a middle-class household in Midland, Ont. But in 1976 his father died of a heart attack, and his family slipped into poverty. Sad and angry, no longer comfortable at home or with his friends, he turned to drugs at the age of nine: "It was a place to go to hide from the world." At 17 he ran away to Vancouver, where he lived by his wits and the stories he could tell — to the police, social workers and the strangers he hit up for a buck or a drink.

In 1989, Roberts decided to reclaim his life, after a fellow street person, Gus, told him, "There is more to you than you can see." He resolved to get clean, stay clean and help

others avoid his fate. Eventually, he found success in Belleville, Ont., where he entered a rehab clinic and studied business marketing at Loyalist College. Roberts made the Dean's List, returned to Vancouver and started selling photocopiers to downtown businesses, door to door, often within sight of his old eastside turf.

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He excelled at sales, and moved on to other jobs, including managing other sales people, before launching Mindware, a creative agency doing website strategy and design. He made his first million before he was 35, and was named one of Vancouver's 40 Under 40 Outstanding Business People. All the time knowing he was one drink away from tumbling back into the abyss of addiction.

Now an author, motivational speaker and philanthropist, with a foundation that battles teen addiction, Roberts told his story to 100 entrepreneurs at a conference organized by Innovators Alliance in Toronto last week. IA is a CEO-coaching group that tackles business and personal challenges, through confidential peer groups in which leaders of Ontario growth businesses discuss their most nagging problems and share solutions.

Most entrepreneurs probably can't identify with his 15 years of despair. But Roberts knows they all encounter doubts, business setbacks and personal sorrows that could knock them down. What matters, he says, is how one responds to those challenges. As he wrote in his 2003 book, *Seven Secrets to Profit from Adversity*, "Your past does not define you... From this moment forward, your future is spotless. ... You are infinitely stronger than anything that life sends your way."

However, Roberts found material success wasn't enough. "I made the money, bought the car, got to the top. But I was empty inside." Adopting the persona of "the Skid Row CEO," he launched a speaking and consulting career, helping business leaders overcome personal and business roadblocks, communication and personnel problems, and other "tough stuff." He also speaks regularly to students, to help them make better life decisions.

Roberts says he is often asked how a homeless addict could possibly become a business success. "I tell them: I wasn't successful in spite of living on the streets; I became successful because I lived on the streets." There, he says, he learned invaluable skills, including:

Perseverance Sleeping under a bridge beside a steam pipe builds patience and resilience, Roberts says. After you've had to sell your shoes for a hit, in winter, the challenges of business seem tolerable.

Power of persuasion To survive on his own, Roberts had to constantly “sell” other people on his ideas, whether he was asking for a handout or avoiding arrest. “If you can do it on the street, you can do it in the boardroom.”

Ability to read people When you’re constantly dealing with the desperate and miserable, you develop instincts about who’s trustworthy and who’s not. “I have the uncanny ability to see people and know what they’re thinking,” In meetings, if he sees people losing the thread, he says, “I’ll call them out and we’ll discuss it right there — not after the meeting when it’s all been undone.”

Communication “The most transferable skill is communication,” he says. For 10 years, he talked to all types of people, from stoners to pedestrians to police. “I can engage with anybody, and get really authentic really quickly.”

But Roberts doesn’t just talk the talk; he’s about to walk the walk. To attract attention to the problems of homeless and at-risk youth, he is training for a 14-month walk pushing a shopping cart across Canada that will launch in May in St. John’s, Nfld.

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