

Cross-country walk for homeless

By Tabitha Wells - Homelessness is an incredibly important issue facing Canadians. That's the point Jason McComb, a former Orangeville resident, is trying to drive home with his Walk for Homelessness, which will take him from coast-to-coast by walking across the country.

'Essentially, people need to know that homelessness is an epidemic, not just in Canada, but everywhere,' explained Mr. McComb.

'It can happen to anybody, no matter what your status in society, job title or lack thereof. There's never been a time where homelessness was a need. Homelessness has always been needless. Unfortunately it exists, and these people that are cast aside and further cast aside.'

For the last few years, he has been living in St. Thomas, Ontario, where he started a non-profit called 'Homeless Happens, Helping Hands' to help the homeless of St. Thomas get back on their feet and reintegrated into society. Having been on the streets a few times himself in situations that were out of his control, he has made it his mission not just to raise awareness, but to make a difference in people's lives.

'There's such a stigma surrounding homelessness that needs to be broken,' said Mr. McComb. 'I want the stereotypes to stop. People seem to understand that we should help the homeless, but believe that there are ones who want to stay on the street, or it's their choice. Nobody wants to stay homeless.'

He added that anyone who appears to want to stay on the street is in that position because they've been conditioned to find almost a comfort in the regularity of their homelessness.

'As humans, we are conditioned by our surroundings,' he said. 'We're conditioned to adapt to a bed and a room when it's time to leave the crib, and we adapt to find comfort in our surroundings. If people think that someone wants to be homeless it's because something is broken in that person. Something has gone wrong and they're afraid to move past what they've become conditioned to.'

Mr. McComb's first walk, from St. Thomas to London, was followed by a walk to Ottawa for homeless war vets in honour of his father, who was a Canadian veteran. The event garnered so much attention that he decided he would walk across Canada. On April 1, he left his office and walked to Queen's Park to meet with his MPP and talk about his idea.

One thing he feels is incredibly important to drive home is that his journey is not a fundraiser in any way, shape or form. The goal is simply to raise awareness about the issue of homelessness and hopefully drive home to Canadians and the government the need to invest in and work towards getting people off the street.

'It would be wrong of me to go across Canada, taking all the money, then going back to St. Thomas and using it for my non-profit there,' he explained. 'The message I'm trying to get across is that everyone in society: homeless, wealthy, no matter what their status, is worthy of life and a place in society.'

On April 16th, Mr. McComb began his cross-country walk at the Terry Fox Monument in St. John's Newfoundland, and will be adding a cancer ribbon to his shirt when he reaches Thunder Bay, where Terry's journey ended.

'Terry Fox will play a big part in this walk, and the cancer ribbon will be both in memory of my father as well as Terry,' he said. 'I'll be finishing the journey that he didn't have the opportunity to complete. Illnesses, both physical and mental, are a big cause of homelessness, so it all ties together.'

Just as Terry had struggles and bumps along the way, Mr. McComb's own journey has been slightly difficult. After being hit by a car as a pedestrian a number of years ago, he suffered extensive injuries and brain damage. While many of his injuries have healed and he has regained most of his cognitive functions, in 2009 he began experiencing seizures caused by the injuries.

Several portions of his walk have been deterred by everything from seizures (which took place after he met with the Trailer Park Boys), to weather, and even an RCMP manhunt.

'It's been quite the journey, and definitely not always easy,' said Mr. McComb. 'But I fully intend to go back and walk the portions that I had to miss. This is so important, and I'm not going to let anything deter me.'

The journey has brought in a lot of support, from celebrities like the Trailer Park Boys, to Prince Charles, and Canadian Olympian Clara Hughes, who spearheaded the Big Ride across Canada in support of Allies for Kids' Mental Health. It was after meeting with Ms. Hughes that he decided it would be fitting to ride back across Canada, rather than just flying back to the start.

One of the biggest things he has seen reinforced throughout his journey is how uncomfortable the average Canadian feels towards the homeless and the topic of homelessness. Spread across his arms, one word on each, Mr. McComb has tattooed 'Homeless Happens', and he makes it a regular habit to hold open doors for people with the arm that reads 'Homeless'.

'I like to make people uncomfortable because they need to see past the bubble they've put themselves in,' he explained. 'It's a little condescending perhaps, but it works. A lot of times people won't look at or acknowledge me after they see my tattoo, and I say to them 'Don't look, you might feel' because it's true. It's the reason that a lot of people look away, because if they feel, then there's a sense of responsibility that falls on them, and they don't want that.'

And just like any revolutionary, history-maker or issue-shaker, Mr. McComb has encountered some resistance to his cause, and people speaking out against what he's doing. But rather than let it deter him, he's using it to fuel himself forward.

'A lot of people don't want me around and don't want to hear what I have to say,' he said. 'I've met some resistance and people who try to deter me, but they only push me forward. Their attempts to make me stop are what tell me that I need to try a little harder and make sure that I succeed.'

Mr. McComb says he would like to thank Orangeville Police, Family Transition Place, the Salvation Army and OPS officer Davdson for finding him a place during his visit here.

Anyone interested in following his journey can visit his Facebook page, Homeless Happens Helping Hands, or on Twitter @HomelessMcJason.