

Joe Roberts - Episode 829

Sat, Sep 30, 2023 6:03PM 1:47:32

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, walk, years, life, vancouver, story, kids, talk, first responders, conversation, downtown eastside, police, mom, living, man, put, newfoundland, place, day, community

SPEAKERS

James Geering, Joe Roberts

J James Geering 00:00

Welcome to the behind the shield podcast. As always, my name is James Geering. And this week, it is my absolute honor to welcome on the show, the man known as the Skid Row CEO, Joe Roberts. So in this conversation, we discuss a host of topics from Joe's early life, the impact that had on his own addiction and homelessness is extremely powerful journey out of his mental health crisis, his success in the world of business, the idea that led him to the 2016 push for change, where he pushed a shopping cart across Canada, the incredible kindness from strangers he encountered along the way, the importance of post traumatic growth and so much more. Now, before we get to this incredibly important conversation, as I say, every week, please just take a moment, go to whichever app you listen to this on, subscribe to the show, leave feedback and leave a rating. Every single five star rating truly does elevate this podcast, therefore making it easier for others to find. And this is a free library of almost 830 episodes now. So all I ask in return is that you help share these incredible men and women's stories. So I can get them to every single person on planet earth who needs to hear them. So with that being said, I introduce to you, Joe Roberts enjoy. Joe, I want to start by saying two things. Firstly, thank you to my friend, Steve Sekiguchi, who I believe sat in one of your presentations and was so enthusiastic about me reaching out to you. And secondly to you yourself for coming on the behind the shield podcast today.

J Joe Roberts 02:03

Thanks, it's, it's an honor. Look, I'm always looking for rooms to share the story and where I know it's going to have a visceral impact. So yeah, I shadowed Steve. And yeah, when I sort of did my recon on LinkedIn, I got excited at the opportunity to reach your listeners so grateful to be here.

J James Geering 02:23

Well, you have a phenomenal story. I would love to start at the very beginning of it. And so walk through obviously not just the kind of couple of chapters that are very evident that you

talk about a lot, but right from the Genesis. So tell me where you were born. And tell me a little bit about your family dynamic what your parents did, and how many siblings?



02:43

Yeah, before we do, I just want to precursor because there there's something I'm always looking for when I'm about to listen to somebody and that's earn the right and I think that one of the biggest things to talk about is that I'm here today because of first responders. I'm here today because of fire. I'm here today because the police, you know, there was a point in my life where it was really sideways and had I not had that interaction. But yeah, go back. Normal Canadian kid grew up in a little town called middlin, which is about an hour and a half north of Toronto. I had a dad that worked at the local seatbelt factory I had an older brother younger sister tree fort in a backyard and fat little dog name Angus that had magical powers. This dog could hear you he could hear you unwrap a cheese wrapper from like three and a half blocks away. He opened the fridge door and he be right there with those begging highs right. The first you know first eight years things were idyllic you know oftentimes when I share the story, it's it was like first eight years was like a sitcom. You know, Cue the music. You know, we would go to school come home in the afternoon mom was a you know, a stay at home mom, it's not that she couldn't have had a career she just chose to follow in her mom's footsteps. So it was the early 1970s. And yeah, for the first eight years things were were were really, really good. And then we got a knock on the door one day and we were informed by our local priest that my father had passed away suddenly from heart failure. And it was just like, boom, everything changed. Like I can trace back almost everything to that, you know that moment. And you know, here we were a lower middle, lower middle class family. We didn't have a lot of money growing up, you know, it was we didn't feel poor. We had a lot of a lot of family wealth. You know if that makes sense like My dad was a real dedicated father. He was a hockey coach baseball coach. You know, he was someone like us kids, he couldn't wait to run home from work. You know, it's like, it's like that scene on Freddy Flintstone. Yabba dabba doo down the tail and off to home, he came and you know, at home, he likes sticking around, he was there for us to throw the ball around to, you know, we had summer vacations and camping and in my father's footsteps, or in his story in his shadow, I felt like loved, safe and protected. You know, he was the kind of man who would say things to me, like, I love you, son, you can do and be anything. And in you know, in that moment, dad was gone. And so internally, I was I was an eight year old boy. So that's huge for for a young boy to lose, they had such a young age. So I had that to deal with my brother and sister, you know, they lost their father, my, my little sister was five, my older brother was 11. So is five, eight and 11. And, like, literally from that knock on the door, everything, you know, like, I lost dad, our family loss. Our Father, my mom, she lost her partner in this little family. And us as a unit lost our economic stability, insecurity. And I think this is probably the first time in my life where I started to feel like anxious. It was probably the beginning seeds of mental health challenges that would, you know, surface later. But I remember there was a lot of a lot of fear coming off mom, you know, she, she's now you know, figuring out how am I going to pay the mortgage dad wasn't well insured. You know, you had enough money to put them in the ground. And that was it. So now we were a family, you know, a single parent family, mom had to raise these three kids on her own, no mortgage. So what happened next was a series of very unfortunate events, you know, mom remarried relatively quickly, and I don't, I don't fault her for that. You know, when you consider, you know, the early 70s, you know, and she was, you know, looking to pay bills and support these three kids. And the guy who came into our family next sort of tick that box, but, you know, I've often said he interviewed really well. But when he got inside the home, he was a violent, abusive alcoholic. And so I went from this dad who said things like, I love you, you can be do anything to a man,

he'd say things like, you're stupid, you're a piece of shit, you'll never amount to anything. And what I know today as a youth advocate is that if you can get a kid to believe a lie, you can sort of predict some of their poor choices later in life. And so I went from this dad who just really love being a dad to a guy who didn't particularly want anything to do with us kids. And for me, personally, I was a target. I was the middle kid. I was a mama's boy. Okay. And I say that with pride to a strong relationship with my mom. But that was a threat to him. He didn't like that. I had emotional intelligence as a boy that he didn't have. And so, you know, here I am now trying to deal with the grief of losing dad. Well layered on top of now this new sort of emotional, physical and mental abuse. And so it's kind of like trauma, trauma. And our family, you know, in the early 70s, we didn't talk about trauma and grief counseling, and, you know, you just suck it up, buttercup, and all of that, you know, grew up around a lot of that sort of male, you know, Big Boys Don't Cry kind of thing. And, and so I learned, you know, like, self sufficiency, or the illusion of self sufficiency and had a hard time sort of reaching my hand for help. And so, you know, this went on for a long time. You know, I Tony, or Tony, my stepfather was, it's funny as I share this story, I just want to sort of little a little caveat or vignette, I forgave him. I realized that you can't recover in hate and he was just a guy like me. Who got shit put on him by his dad, likely, you know what I mean? It's like hurt people hurt people. So I get it. And yeah, I remember saying to myself, Man, when this when this, when this guy dies, I'm going to do the jig, like, because I knew it. And when he did finally pass away alone as an alcoholic and an SRO and downtown Barrie, I felt a sadness. You know, because he never got recovery, you never got to deal with his demons, you never got to make it right with his family. It was so sad when he died. He had two families, you had a family before us and us with three kids. And a second wife, and two kids and our first wave, and nobody would claim the body. That's the kind of wreckage you know. And so I look at that today. And I think well, but for the grade school, I I happen to be a lucky guy who had those people and stumbled into that recovery community and managed to get my my stuff together. But it could have easily been, yeah. So by the time I'm 1415 tested the world. You know, I'm, I'm starting to act out. I'm starting to get in trouble at school, and I'm starting in trouble in the community. And when I was when I was nine, my brother and his his older friends, and I always wanted to be a part of my brother's crowd. Like I always, I always looked up to my brother, but he never invited me in that much. I don't know what was going on there. But I was but I was always trying to be a part of that that group. And one day they were they were using drugs. And he said, you want to join us? And I was like, Yeah, and it wasn't that I was curious about doing drugs or getting high or the impact that would have on my body I wanted to fit. And so I was willing to do whatever. You know, it took to belong, because belonging was something that I was yearning for. And so I used drugs for the first time and I remember going home high.



12:12

By the way, I couldn't tell people for the longest I used to lie. I used to tell people I smoked pot. I went home high on this flat out lie it was glue. We were sniffing glue. Right? But I was so ashamed of that. I've used solvents, right, lots of shame. Anyway, so I went home under the influence of solvents and a sitting on my mom's green plaid couch. And I know it's like Gilligan's Island or something with playing on the TV. And my head was just like, and my stepdad will come into the house, he used to come in loud and aggressive. That was sort of his MO and you do that to intimidate frighten everybody, and we would all kind of scurry off into our corner. For the first time. I wasn't afraid of him. I remember sitting there on the couch and smiling at him like a Cheshire Cat, right? Because under the influence, I wasn't afraid of them. I thought you can't you can't get me here. And I remember just grinning at him like what are you going to do? I found a way to cope and emotionally uncertain world. That's what substance gave me is it

gave it actually worked. It's like I so get why, you know, people who are dealing with trauma or dealing with depression or dealing with uncertainty, anxiety, fear, look at the last couple of years. It's like we see an uptick right across the board. It's not just in America, it's everywhere. You know, Australia, UK, Canada, the US. When we are dealing with emotional uncertainty and fear and anxiety and all kinds of stuff or unresolved trauma, it's like it's a natural go to, to want to medicate and change the way we feel because it feels like it feels like shit. And so I found a way at nine years old to say, Ah, man, this is this is my ticket. And it wasn't like, you know, I signed up for this rebellion or lawlessness or any of that it was like this worked. So I'm going to do it again. I'm gonna do it. And what happens is, you know, the story is so familiar to stop working, and it started to have far more consequences than, than benefits. By the time I was 15. It started to show itself and behavior at school, I started to become aggressive. I started getting trouble in the community. I started getting trouble with law enforcement at 15 years old. I got kicked out of the house. At 16 years old. I dropped out of school. And at 17 years old, I got arrested for the first time and it all happened like Bing Bing Bing, just as this like there was this whole pile of things that were happening in succession and I didn't feel like I had control. You know, it's like I felt out of control. And the only thing that was really going well, for me at this point was I was in a relationship with a girl I dated in grade 10. And what's, what's interesting about this relationship is that she was the only person in the world who I let know who I really was, you know, even my mom, I, you know, I had some a mask or a guard up. But this gal was dating I, you know, I let her in. And I showed my my real self, but my behavior was such that I was getting into trouble every weekend, I was getting into fights, I was getting into, you know, trouble with legal, you know, the with with police and stuff. And so after about a year and a half a date, and she finally sat me down and said, I'm not, I'm not going where you're going, like, I believe in you, I really do. I think you're a wonderful young man. But I want to go to college, I want to have kids. I want to have a career, and I don't, I don't know where you're going, but I don't want any part of it. And so the relationship dissolved. And I remember what triggered for me it was a whole bunch of feelings around sort of abandonment. I didn't realize at the time, but it was like, you know, it's just like losing dad, right? It's like everybody that I counted on, you know, eventually disappeared. And so I was alone. I was scared. I used you know, more alcohol and drugs. By this time, I had graduated from solvents to pot and marijuana and, and, you know, LSD and cocaine. And I was basically that teenager that was sort of hell bent. And at that point in my life, it was really about the party. You know, and the surface I wore, I wore it well, it looked like I was having a good time, I was just sowing my wild oats if you will, right. But inside was this scared little boy that had never really grown up, and never really dealt with the big stuff. And I didn't understand that until decades later. But I wanted my welcome out in a little town. We moved from Midland and I was now living in Barrie, which is just down the road closer to Toronto. And after I broke up, I decided I was gonna go west, I was gonna go to Vancouver. And the year was 1986. And the World's Fair was on Expo 86. And so I thought, I'm gonna go out and see what's going on in Vancouver. I'll get the job done, I'll get a fresh start. It'll be great. And back in those days, you could jump on a Greyhound bus and go anywhere in Canada, east or west for 99 bucks if you'd like you could literally go from Halifax to Victoria for 99 bucks so that I went to Toronto Bay Street, got my \$99 ticket and headed west for fame and fortune. The thing that I didn't understand is that I packed all that trauma with me, I packed all of that crap with me. And now, I had moved, you know, 4000 miles away from chin away from family away from this little community that had resources for me a school that I may have been able to interact with or go back to family, uncles, aunts, friends. And I remember when I landed in Vancouver, there, I had this overwhelming feeling of aspiration. You know, it's like, yeah, Vancouver is a place where I'm going to get a redo a mulligan, anybody plays golf knows what a mulligan is a start over a redo of a drop. All right, doesn't count. And little did I know that that part, I remember that. It was a beautiful sunny May. May I think it's like may 12, may 14, beginning of May. And the sun was

coming up over the Downtown Eastside. And I remember had this overwhelming feeling of aspiration, you know, yeah, this is a place where I'm going to get a fresh start. And little did I know that within within about two weeks, I'd actually be living in that park. You know, I moved away from all oversight. And so when I did communicate back with my mom, because I still had a you know, I still had a line and in with her. I didn't tell her how bad it was going. And what happened in Vancouver is I got introduced to more dangerous substances and I got into cocaine, I got into heroin. And so within, you know, within a few weeks, I was in that park and within a month or two after that I was actually sleeping under the bridge beside that park. And over the next, you know, number of years I was that regular guy you'd see in the inner city You know, kid in his late teens, early 20s, pushing a shopping cart support and an opioid dependency. I never planned on it. And I was quite ashamed to wear it, you know, my station in life. But it didn't have the I didn't have the internal assets to turn it around on my own. I, every day I woke up, I wanted to be different. I wanted to live up to, you know, standards that I grew up as a kid. But I was I was sort of stuck in this sort of vicious circle of addiction. And I couldn't I couldn't get there on my own. Yeah. So I found myself in, you know, years went by. And during this time, and I think this is important to talk about is I did have a warm, fuzzy relationship with police, with first responders with, like, even emergency rooms, when I found myself in and out of emergency I was I was one of those guys who was just a high volume contact, the kind of guy you see in your community that just frickin wears you down, because it's like, oh, man, this is like the 70th time we brought this guy back to life. You know, that was me. I am that quintessential draw on community resources. I was an addict. I was in and out of courts. I was in and out of homeless shelters. I was the guy in the food lineup. I was I was the guy getting talked to by police to three times a week. It wasn't that I was a threat in the community. It wasn't like I was this big time gangster bad guy. I was a nuisance more than I was a threat. You know, not an I don't want to color it wrong. I was I was no saint. But I wasn't you know, I was was no Al Pacino, either, you know, it's like I wasn't a mastermind criminology common garden variety, dope fiend, trying to get it on a daily basis, right. And so, you know, years went by and it and it was like,



22:12

it was like, I lived in a house with dirty windows. My light didn't get out. And the light out there didn't get in. And it just sort of was like the boil the frog thing. It just happened over time. Until one time, I found myself, you know, living on the streets, pushing a shopping cart to collect cans and bottles. And that was that was where life sort of default took me. And one day, just before Christmas, in 1989, I was beginning to descend into opiate withdrawal. And I don't I don't share this component of the story to trigger anybody. But I was beginning to descend and go down further, deeper and deeper and deeper into opiate withdrawal. And the only way I can describe that for those who are not really familiar with that as a process, it's like the worst flu you've had in your life. Yeah, you get the hot sweats, cold sweats, you get pounding headache, upset stomach, you can't sleep, your anxiety is going through the roof. Right. So think about the time when you've been really really ill with the flu, you know, you're curled up on a couch, you're just trying to get through the day, you got no energy. It's just everything is hard. Now imagine that times 100 And you're on a park bench in the rain. And you know that 10 bucks makes it go away. 10 bucks. That's it. And as much as you don't want to, you don't want to feel that, that that crap. any longer. And I remember sitting on a park bench and I was beginning to descend into withdrawal three days before Christmas. I know that because it was my brother's birthday. And I just felt like hell and I didn't want to steal or rob or be violent. That just wasn't who I was. It was that wasn't my character. But I needed 10 bucks. And I remember looking down at my feet and I came up with what I thought was my best my best move and I was

waiting for the bar across the street to open it was called the it's called the rainbow hotel. It's called the Pennsylvania today and this was right in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in that infamous sort of 510 square block area. I was in a little place called pigeon Park. And I walked into the bar and I sold the only item I had left in the world it was worth anything and it was the boots off my feet. And I remember walking outside and I traded those boots for for for some drugs and I use them and sort of took the edge off but I remember walking outside and it was cold and rainy socks I've been wearing for a year. It my foot touch the cold concrete sidewalk. And I just remember, James having this feeling like I just don't want to be here anymore. You know, it's like, life was so fucking hard. And I heard so much and I couldn't see my way out. You know, it's like it was hidden. And this is where I believe that something changed. You know, it's like, there's a moment where I became willing to do something different.



25:42

You know, maybe you can call it personal accountability, maybe you can call it divine intervention. In this moment, I had these like, deep thoughts of harm and myself.



25:57

And, and I'm grateful I never took action on those. You know, instead, I remember I walked across back to the park and I sat in that park bench. And I, I remember looking up and it was like the, you know, the rain was coming down to my face, and I just cried out for help, you know, and I said, this little prayer, and I, you know, I would never describe myself as someone who's deeply religious. But I've always sort of believed in something benevolent out there. And that has my best interests. And I asked, you know, in this petition, this little prayer, I



26:31

said, I want a second chance. I don't deserve it. But I really, really love a second chance man. And you give me a second chance, I will not waste the opportunity, and I'll do something to help others.



26:45

And I didn't think much of that little, you know, street corner, desperation, prayer. But the next day, I walked into this soup kitchen. And there was this guy, his name was I think his name was Bill. And he and I knew each other because he was always there. And he was serving squash soup that day, and he had an apron that was all orange. And he looked at me and like, I look rough. You know, I was I looked like a drowned cat had been raining all night rains a lot in Vancouver. And you notice right away, I wasn't wearing shoes. So he got me a pair of shoes. And he says, What do you want to do Joe? And I said, I think I want to, I think I want to get clean. And I remember he came around from where he was serving the soup. And he came over to give me a hug. And I was like, you know, get away from me. You got soup all over you. Right? You know, like, I will never wear the same clothes for a year and a half. Right? It's funny how pride age just gets in the way even. Yeah, anyways, he put a squeeze on me and he said, let's get you the help you need. You know, when I think back to that moment. The heaviest

thing that ever lifted in my life was man for hell. You know, and it's like, today I've got this really high level of of empathy can be devastating sometimes because I feel a lot a I feel people's stuff when I'm around. Like crowds are weird for me because I can pick up that energy. I feel it right. But in that moment, you know, I think I was teachable. And I was, yeah, I was willing to try something new. And Bill went into the bathroom with me. And we, you know, we did an asset inventory and my mom was at the top of the list. He said, let's call your mom. I said I'm a bug mom. I've been bugging her all my life. And she says our moms don't give up though. We rang mom and I begged her for a second chance. She said okay, I'll give you one more. And then she flew out to Vancouver. I was 160 pounds at drugstores all over my face. I was you know, I was at death's door. I'll tell you this. If I was using that was 89 You know if I was using drugs today, I don't I don't know what the toxicity of drugs. I don't you know, I honestly I don't I don't think I made it out of there. I use recklessly and anyways, mom, mom scooped me up, took me home put me in her basement. And so in a lot of ways mom provided a housing first strategy for me. But she couldn't do anything about the mental Hall. She couldn't do anything about the trauma. You know, and I I was away from illicit drugs. I was away from pills. I was away from cocaine. I was away from heroin. You know, these kinds of things, but I still I drank it I just switched. You know, it's like switching, you know, they say switching seats on the Titanic. I just switched and just fell into the bottle and one of my patterns is I used to drink and become really despondent and have a lot of dark thoughts, you know? So there I was in my mom's basement I need to go back a bit because there's party left out. When I bought three weeks before I left the Downtown Eastside I met a man who would forever define my belief in sort of human potential, if you will, his name was Gus. And she, I remember I sat down beside him because he had a cigarette and I was a mooch. There's no real nice way to color that. That's kind of who I was. I was I was a selfish person. And I sat down beside because I thought he was an easy mark. And I remember he looked at me his name, when I got to know his name, his name was Gus, and he was about 75 years old. He had the shock of white hair and these piercing blue eyes. And I remember he looked at me and he said, you know, Joe, he says, You're an amazing young man. He says, if you were able to deal with your, you know, your homelessness, and your, you know, your addictions, you could go out in the world and do something absolutely extraordinary with your life. And he said to me, he says, Joe, there's so much more to you than you can see. And I remember thinking at the time, listen, Bob, you don't know me very well. And there's far less to me than, than you can see. Well, what's interesting about what Gus spoke to, and I think this is probably one of the it's one of the things I speak to the most when I'm talking to leaders, I'm talking to parents is a belief impossibility. In fact, it's backed by good research. Dr. Carol Dweck, Stanford Research, he talks about fixed versus growth mindset. When we have stuff happen, we tend to lean towards more of a fixed mindset, I am filling the blank, right? And so if I am fill in the blank, like for me, I am a loser. Why would you bother putting in the effort. But if you put effort forward, you could actually change that narrative to I'm not a loser. I'm a winner. I mean, it's a simple, this, this idea of, we are not our circumstances, we're not our past. And we're not even our thoughts. We're so much more than that. And that's what God spoke to. And so for the first time in my life, someone other than my mom or my dad, he spoke to my possibility. And I never thought anything about that wasn't until years later, I remember that conversation. Right? Sometimes, you know, when I'm working with somebody who's, you know, going through so much, that's, that's all I'm trying to do is get them encouraged to believe that there is something more than this, and to get them to take a tiny little step forward, a tiny step forward, because if they take that tiny step forward, they'll discover their possibility. They'll change their emotional climate. And, you know, the begin moving towards something. Something different anyways, back at mom's house, I, I continued to struggle, I was, you know, drinking and falling into depression and suicide ideation. And one night, she walked into the room and what she saw it scared her, and she ran out of the room, and she called the Ontario Provincial Police. And I was sitting on

the edge of the bed, and I had a handgun. And that just really freaked her out. And I don't know what I said, but it wasn't obviously encouraging. And so she freaked out and called the opp. And, you know, as I said earlier, I, I never had a warm, fuzzy relationship with law enforcement. And called to the scene that day was constable Scott McCloud. And what happened over the next 20 minutes or so changed the trajectory of my life. And it wouldn't be the first time this has happened. But I believe it in in, in so many ways, Scotty was ahead of the Mental Health bell curve. And, you know, it's funny years later, he was interviewed. And I actually understand use of force training today that that interaction could have ended real quick. And justifiably so if you know, that officer feels threatened, the use of force is justified. Instead, what Scotty did is he diffused using communication skills and empathy, he diffused an incredibly dangerous situation. And instead, that ended poorly for me that night, I got a ride to the mental health unit at the local hospital. And over the next several weeks, they helped me get to a place where I was stable enough to make a decision to go into residential treatment program in eastern Ontario. And so, what's what's interesting about that, is that, you know, so often we, you know, we get these horrific examples of what happens when it goes horribly wrong. In fact, you and I were talking about that about the news and how it's, you know, there's only two things on you know, TV or the internet. It's like you things that are scary are things that you know, make you angry or outraged. And what happens when a police interaction or fire interaction goes wrong it's so it's there's more money in vilifying take a look at the news on



35:20

you know, fire and getting rid of encampments, because they're a fire hazard. All of those stories are the same way. It's like the bad guys have showed up. It's like, well, no propane tanks go boom, like, you have an intense but anyways, Scotty, you know defuse this, this really dangerous situation. And, and it's a really great example of what happens when it goes incredibly well. And I think we need to tell more of those stories. You know, one of the things having worked with so many please and first responders is that the people don't get to hear the good stories, you might have stood in stadiums with 25,000 people who are in long term recovery. Some of them will, you know, whatever, a year, clean six months, some with 35. And I can I probably probably bet 98% of them had interaction with fire with ambulance with police, but they're not going back to the police station knocking on the door say yeah, I want to thank you for arresting me and, you know, throw me in the pokey and they're not they're not doing that, but they're going on with their lives, you know, they've you know, they they're 234 years sober they got a painting company now their kids are back in their life they you know, they meet a man's with their parents like these stories are as perennial as the grasses screen they were just not telling them enough. And so it's it's like this, this is the kind of call that you know, you want to carry. Unfortunately, it's it's all the other calls that we carry that ultimately impact our mental health. And anyways, when I had a year sober I wrote Scott a letter and I said, hey, thanks. You know, he arrested me, He charged me with three charges, serious charges. And I went through the process, went through the courts, took my licks, made amends, went through all everything I needed to do when I had a a year. When I graduated college, I wrote him another letter and thanked him. And when my when my daughter was born, they phoned him and thanked him. When I had 10 years, in my recovery community, they gave me a coin and jumped on an airplane, I was living in Vancouver, and I jumped on an airplane flew all the way across the country knocked on the Rose Street detachment of the opp and gave that coin to Scotty. I think that when you look at why you do what you do, somewhere deep down our core values of purpose, a passion and a why. But life life size, and that gets tarnished various different things the last couple of years have been so brutal, so much change so much challenge so much uncertainty so much. Just so much so much. Right. And it doesn't seem to

add it's like just flick on the news today and there's just more of it. And so connecting to why and I think that you know stories like this, I've often thought wouldn't it be cool if you were able to create a national catalog of good stories and and share those good stories. Anyway, say after I got stabilized I went to treatment I had this social worker tricked me into going to college. He flat out lied to me. He did Maddie is coming in. He was one of these guys that had glasses and he looked over top of his glasses, you know these pretentious smart people, right? Yeah, clipboard and he's looking over his glasses at me and he says, Hey, Joe. He says your housing is running out. You've been here six months, you got to make a move. And he says if you if you do an application at the local community college, I can get you six more months of housing. Because he knew he was my one on one counselor. He knew where my roadblocks were. He knew about you know how I saw him. I didn't see myself as smart. I grew up 10 years in the shadow the guy who told me I was stupid. I bought into that. And so that's how I acted right? Anyways, he tricked me into going to college, I walk on the campus that Loyalist College, I'm 24 years old and feeling intimidated. You know, like I don't belong here. And then I had these really great professors and something magical happened is I put my head down and did the work. You know, it's amazing how the emotion keeps our feet from moving forward, but when we take those few steps, the emotional climate changes and all of a sudden you get a glimpse opaque as it may be, you can see something you can see something through there. And then eventually, you know, there is some light at the end of the tunnel and I started to get A's and B's and I have these great teachers and you know finally after three yours. I walked across the stage at loyalists and they said Joe Roberts dean's list. And I graduated with a 3.94 GPA. And I remember I had this group in the audience is bikers and leather jacket were in recovery. You know, they're scaring people and bringing down property values. There they are Holland and Hooton because they knew how far I came to walk across that platform. And when I look back at my life, and sort of what happened after that, it's like, I'm here today because over 10,000 people, I'm not special, I had access to reside access to treatment, I met a guy named Gus and then a guy named Scott McCloud. You know, when I was in the Downtown Eastside, I would say no less than 100 times, first responders and fire brought me back to LA. Like countless times, they were dragging me out of an SR, it'll bring me over to St. Paul's. You know, funnily, I actually got to do a ride along this past January or February with firehall, number two in downtown Vancouver. And I got to share with them because today, nine out of 10 of their calls are overdose. And again, they don't get to hear the good stories. And so I, you know, I got to, I got to see it from their perspective. And I also got to share a little bit of my journey. And anyways, I graduated with honors, I needed to go out in the business world and get a job I was sick of living in Ontario, they get harsh winters. So I decided I'm going to give Vancouver another, you know, another another swing, and I'd five years sober at this point. So I loaded up my 82 Honda Civic on the back of a U haul, and headed west for fame and fortune again, but this time, it turned out well. I got my first job in sales working on Minolta Canada, and absolutely crushed it. And, and then I had another friend of mine after a year that I left friend of mine was starting this.com technology business, you know, building websites and corporate video and, and he explained the tech to me, but I didn't really understand it, but I knew how to sell it. I had this really, you know, this gift of gab, it's interesting. Almost everything that I have today comes from that negative life experience. You know, I mean, think about COVID Or you think about the greatest challenges that we face often can prepare us for work somewhere else, the greatest tragedies that people go through losing a son or a daughter or that first marriage didn't work out, or Yeah, I think that great advocacy, not always, but sometimes can be born out of great pain and suffering and struggle. And I knew how to communicate with people. I had to do it for 10 years, and I had to shape behavior using communication to get through a day, every day, I woke up with an unsolvable puzzle. And so I had that I had perspective, I know what a bad day looks like when COVID hit three and a half years ago, I remember going on, I've been here before 1000 times. And I had this toolbox. It's like any

purse, anyone listen to this right now. It's like, you will not be able to look through life from this day forward without looking through the lens of COVID. It's baked in. And not always, but a lot of times those negative life experiences give us tools that build resilience, they give us perspective. And when somebody says, Oh, it's been a bad day, and you reflect on Wait a minute, I've had bad days isn't a bit when COVID is like this a bad day. And for me, it's like it is but I've seen I've seen some pretty bad days and I knew how to emotionally cope. Anyways, I I joined partnership with this partner and mostly because he believed in me, you know, and we put our heads down and I came up for air about three and a half years later. And I looked around and I didn't recognize my own life. I was driving this great, big, ostentatious German sedan. I won't tell you the make but the initials were BMW.

 James Geering 44:20

That's a tricky one.

 44:23

The value of x and the car was important to me, you know, the blame was important to me in the beginning making money and yesterday, I drove a Toyota, I got over it. But I'm driving this big, expensive car to a company that had like 50 people working for it. And I'm going down into the Downtown Eastside and I'm in one of those states where you're not mentally present to where you are. And then you kind of off in the clouds. And I stopped at the corner and I'm like right in the neighborhood and I look out my tinted window, and it was a kid about 19 with a shopping cart full of cans and bottles. My old vocation and my old location. And it hit me how far it come when I got to the office that day sitting on sitting on my desk was a copy of Canadian business, and I was on the cover of it. And less than 12 years, I went from, you know, a guy struggling with addiction, homelessness, suicide ideation to the Canadian version of the American dream. And, you know, for years, that's where the story ended. And that was kind of a nice little wrapper. Isn't that cool? Well, the arc of, you know, the rags to riches story. Oh, that's fantastic. Well, you got everything that our western culture teaches brings happiness, joy, and I wasn't any more fulfilled, I had it all. I got the house, I got the blessing I got, I got some awards, I got some attaboys wasn't anymore, and what I've learned in the process, and I'm 56 years old now. I think that we show up best in this world when we're in the service of others. And so that's what I tried to do now. It's like, I, in 2003, I left the business world, I had built a company to my level of incompetence. You know, I grew through the leadership ranks till I found myself sitting in a chair. And on Sunday night, I just dreaded going to work in the morning. And it wasn't that we weren't six, I wasn't successful. I was. But I wasn't doing work that was passionate and meaningful anymore. And so I said, I'm out. And my daughter was born in 2003. And so I left I sold my piece of the company and me and I went off on my merry little way. And I wanted to do advocacy and work with youth, troubled youth in schools and group homes. And so I started doing some of that. And I started to speak in high schools, and I did a couple 100 of those. And next thing I know, somebody found out that connection between my story in the business world, so I got asked to speak at chambers of commerce and lived experience panels. And anyways, years past and I started working with this guy named Dr. Shawn Richardson. I wrote a book. And Shawn and I were doing consulting management, and we were on an aeroplane going into Calgary. And I said, Shawn, I want to do something, to engage the country in a conversation, what we can do to better protect young people. support those kids that struggle with mental health support kids that come from a different background

sport, kids that come from a different, you know, sexual orientation support kids that come from First Nations community support kids that come from violence, or early childhood trauma experience, and give them what they need. So they don't end up, you know, pushing a shopping cart like I did. And Shawn Eaton is a former Olympic athlete, he's also a high performance. He's also a former Olympic athlete. He's also a PhD in high performance psychology. So he works in professional sport. In fact, you should have him on the show. He's, he's brilliant. And Sean says to me says, he says, Well, when Canadians want to raise money for things they run across the country, you know, he says, We're inspired by Rick Hansen. And, of course, Terry Fox. And he says, Why don't you run across Canada? Joe? And I see you run across. Sell, right? Yeah. Yeah. I didn't want to run to the store or run to the corner. I was 45 years old and a self admitted non athlete. And I'd spent the last 15 years sort of behind a desk and behind a computer and, you know, the pounds catch up with you. And you know, I maybe I was active when I was 20, or 25. But it certainly wasn't at 45. And so the notion of, you know, trawling across the second largest country on Earth didn't really appeal to me. But then he said something, he says, you know, Joe, he says, When you share your story with people I watch, I'm usually in the side watching people, you you emotionally impact people, and they you changes the way they see the world. And whether it's students, whether it's government officials would imagine what he said, Imagine what you could do if you walk across the entire country, maybe you don't run your walk. And you have that conversation on what we could do to better protect kids. And I said, Okay, I put on my business hat. I said, What's the value proposition differential? How's this gonna be different? How's this gonna be unique? How are we going to make anybody take notice or care? He says, I got it. He says, Why don't you push a shopping cart across Canada. It's a symbol of chronic homelessness. It's the thing you're trying to avoid for every kid. And there was something about the push a shopping cart across Canada that made the hair on the back of my neck tangle. It was such an outrageous idea. But there was something about it that just really, really captured my imagination. I thought that that'd be cool. And then he said, he says you could Call it a push for change. And it was kind of like we were sitting in the front of the plane, the plane landed, we went and did our business, I went home. And I started doing these really long walks and posting them on the Facebook. I went do this 30 Now you're gonna remember, I'm not an active athlete, I post a 30 Kilometer walk on my Facebook page, then the next the 24 Kilometer walk and then next the 22 Kilometer walk. Shawn phones me now. Tell you about Shawn. He did his PhD on injury in elite athletes. That's what his PhD was on. He says, What do you do? And I said, Well, you remember that conversation on the plane, I'm going to do that walk across Canada thing. He says if you lost your mind, I said you're the psych you tell me. He says that he said something really cool. He says I want to help you. And we'll do it right. First thing you're going to do is take a couple of days off, because you're going to blow your knee or hip flexor year, you're doing way too much. And so with Sean's help, you know, he was the first Yes. And over the next. You know, next couple of months, we built a beta shopping cart. And then, you know, it was wasn't a shopping cart with us kids from a local high school and use them as a think tank. They said use a baby carers, strip it down and, you know, make us make a shopping cart. Because look crossing Canada, there's no way to do it without going through one Canadian winter. So it needed to be lightweight, winterized. You know, a real shopping cart. I mean, I push the real shopping cart. Every time I get one of that you can't push one of those. That's a Home Depot parking lot without, you know, or worse, you get one of those with a non compliant rear wheel that, you know. So we build a shopping cart those first 9999 Problem Solving now we had to do a whole bunch of other things. We had to get me mentally and physically fit. So I did a walk from Calgary to Vancouver in the summer of 2012. That's sort of like the warm up. And, you know, I walked 1100 kilometers in two months. And I remember coming into Vancouver and I just had this, this this belief that it was possible, you know, so we stepped back in over the next couple of years with the help. And then then we built a bigger group, Marie, my wife, she jumped on

board as a campaign director and Sean and you know, we got some sponsors together. We reached out to first responders, they said, Yeah, we'd love to be a part of this fire and police and we raised a million dollars. And it was important to our charity said we are not going to take a nickel that goes in the bucket to pay for the campaign. So we need a million dollars before we take the first step, which is different, and we weren't corporately sponsored and it wasn't like this was, you know, the ABC push for change it was just us it was a grassroots campaign. But I didn't want people given their 20 or \$30. And knowing that was going into a gas tank or pay salaries, right I wanted, I wanted all that money to go and help the kids. Anyways, three and a half years of living in possibility we had 27 we counted the one day 27 showstopping roadblocks. These were these were issues that could derail this campaign and stop it in its tracks 27. And so it was like we had to fly in the fog. Because a rational mind would look at that and go you can like you don't have like there was a there was a moment where we didn't have police support. And we're about to push a shopping cart into Northern Ontario in the wintertime, like how long is that going to last. But we had to ignore that and continue to stay in action building the campaign. So it took like, two and a half years to build it out. Finally, we had everything in place. We resolved every single one of those those challenges and roadblocks. And I found myself in Cape Spear Newfoundland, looking at a 9000 Kilometer walk across the country. And I was scared to death. You know, I had two fears, one that my body wasn't going to make it into. Nobody was going to care.



53:58

And I was wrong on both of those issues. And over the next 17 months we slowly traversed Atlantic Canada was absolutely fabulous. But sparse. So like Newfoundland was, it's true what they say about Newfoundland, they're the nicest people in the world. They they just welcomed us we, you know, we slowly I remember, I remember the coolest donation I got in Newfoundland and walking along the side of highway I don't know it's six 700 kilometers into the track. And I looked down and there's there's a bunch of little rocks on top of two \$5 bills. Somebody had driven by and put the money and left And anyways, we had really great engagement in places like Ghana, Newfoundland and Puerto bass and then we made our way through Nova Scotia, up through P e i across the island of Prince Edward Island through New Brunswick through Quebec and then when we got to Ontario, now I had been walking for almost five months 2300 kilometres, and it was relatively quiet. But when we hit Ontario all hell broke loose. We had support from EMS, we had the support from all kinds of different fire departments. And we had this we had the community safety partnership with the opp. And so they welcomed us into the province. And I remember crossing the bridge and looking down at this crowd and it was the biggest crowd I l'd seen up to this point, it was like, maybe 1000 people, they had bus students in from local high schools. And I remember, you know, feeling like okay, this, this is going to be different in Ontario. And I remember walking to the bottom of that bridge, and then I got then I got really choked up because waiting for me at the bottom of that bridge was somebody I recognized right away. It was the greatest hockey dad in the world. It was Walter Gretzky, father a Wayne Gretzky. Wow. You're taking time? Yeah. Yeah, it was, like, I could not believe my eyes. But the LVP had a relationship with Walter and he came out, he actually walked with us to the community that day, like all four kilometers, and he was he wasn't in his best form. But I remember looking at Walter and I wanted to you know, I wanted to glean some advice from somebody I admire. I do this with a lot of leaders. I mean, and I said, you know, well, Walter, what one piece of advice would you give me as I'm about to walk into Northern Ontario? And he said, Don't quit. And I remember thinking, geez, I was I was kind of hoping for something. Less generic. Yeah, something less bumper sticker Re. And so a little bit more teeth. You know, I had a lot of time to think about that message. I mean, don't

quit. If it's good enough to create, arguably one of the greatest hockey players that have ever lived, because other kids are pretty good, too. It's, it's good, you know, and I think about that message, often if, if everyone who was struggling simply had one person in their corner to say, don't quit. Now, I believe in you, man, you're not having your best day, your best week, your best year, but I believe in you don't quit. Don't give it up, man. And just to cheer folks on, I think we would have more resilient fire halls, we'd have more resilient police stations, we'd have more resilient schools, we'd have more resilient families, we would have more resilient countries. You know, some, I think that one of the things that COVID taught me is that we are meant to be in community. You know, I spent so many years on the outside looking in society. And it was it was a self imposed kind of COVID pushing my shopping cart amongst 1000s of people that I had no connection to. And, you know, you'll Han Hari, you know, says the, and I'm probably going to butcher the quote, but it's the opposite of addiction isn't recovery. It's it's connectedness, it's community. Yeah. And that's what was missing in my life for so long. And it's funny to James, I'm, I'm introverted, I didn't learn that until I was in my early 50s. I get my energy when I'm alone, and I'm walking when I'm riding my bike. You know, and it's weird because I'm in front of 1000s of people every week doing what I do, but I need to force that connection to people. And to stay plugged into that recovery community and my my sponsor and my my people, and wrap myself out, let people know what's going on for me when it's going on. Anyways, we made our way, all the way through Ontario 1000s of I think the opp had 150 events. When it was done the entire country we had over 454 events we raised close to \$700,000. But there was some tough days Northern Ontario in the wintertime. You know, walking in like minus 40 Celsius, 70 Kilometer hour winds coming off Lake Superior, but when it got hard, I connected to why I signed up for it. And I would think about you know Sydney and Cameron, two kids that I knew in the streets of Vancouver from small towns just like me, who ended up moving out to Vancouver and getting sort of gobbled up by you know, that that street life and that's what kept me going and so you know, it's like Walters words and and a deep connection to why slowly saw me, you know, walk all the way through Ontario took seven months just to get through Ontario and then across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, over the Rocky Mountains and down into Vancouver and I remember the last day



59:58

you know, I was walking along and And we had a crowd of about 1000 people and we had



1:00:06

we had fire, we had police. We had friends from all across the country. We had our sponsors. We had our family, we had school kids, and we were walking down Hastings Street. And I remember when we requested this, the Vancouver Police Department, we said we want to walk down here since this event, it's kind of an arterial route, can you take another street and I was like, no, because Hastings Street is the street. For those who know know that downtown East Hastings is that epicenter that we see on the news when Vancouver's Downtown Eastside as described. And so I said, that's the, that's the neighborhood. And I want to walk through that. And they eventually eventually agreed and, and I remember the day started off all joyfilled. And we slowly walked from the outer part of the city and Burnaby down into the Downtown Eastside. And I remember when we got close, and we crossed over this threshold. It's very visceral down there. There's tent encampments, there's there's people that are really struggling with a ton of stuff. And there's no escaping it, you turn your eyes, the left or right,

you're gonna see an eyeful. And I remember how quiet the group got. And it was in that moment that I think they understood sort of some of the things that we were pushing for. And I remember how to pass that park where I sat bootless, hopeless, right on that corner, I made that prayer and that promise. And I felt, you know, back in the day, I used to be so ashamed, hey, I couldn't look people in the iOS, look at my feet. I push my shopping cart, collect my cans, do my panhandle, whatever it was, it was up to but I didn't like engaging people. Because I had that deep shame. And you know, that day my chin was up.



1:01:55

And I wasn't ashamed. And I remember walking past that park bench where where I had that that worst day of my life.



1:02:05

And I looked at my left and there was Scotty McLeod, OPP constable who was there for me. And yeah, it's pretty special. We went up to camby Street, we turned the corner. And we went up to the I went up to library just outside of BC Place arena. And we had our very last event. And something something that was was really interesting when I was in Newfoundland. In nowhere I found this penny on the on the road. And I knew at the time it was symbolic, but I didn't quite know what it meant. And and here's the circumstance I was walking along in the pouring rain in the middle of nowhere. There's a lot of nothing in Newfoundland rocks tree there's more moose than there are people on on the island and and I looked down and there was a penny and crusted in the dirt. One that kind of looks like the one I've got right here. I know people can't see this but you can. And it was all was all dirty and scrunched up and and when I picked it up, what was amazing is I found this in a place that a penny had no business being. And I remember thinking and it was the same color as the dirt. Yeah, that I found it and so it was just miraculous that I happen to look down at the same time and and then it hit me and I found this penny in the street. It's Penny it traveled up harder road. This Penny had seen and experience things that other pennies hadn't. This Penny had spent a couple of nights out in the weather. What occurred to me as I held that penny in my hand is that even though it scratched up and beat up and sat harder go at life and doesn't look as pretty and shiny as the other pennies are pretty and shiny as it it was mentored by the very nature of what it is it can never ever, ever, ever, ever lose its value. And neither can a human being no matter what. And I put that penny in my pocket. And 8000 kilometers later, I pulled it out. And I shared that story with the President and Director of the United Association of Canada and I gave him the penny. And about an hour and a half later, he traded me with a check for \$1 million to continue to do the work in supporting youth at risk through our foundation. So I mean that's now there's one last little thing I need to share with you. That's probably, in my opinion, the best part of this whole story. The person who doesn't get credit for that walk across Canada is Marie. I get the award as you see him on the wall. I get this word that word honorary doctorate, yada yada yada. Thanks. And look, I'm not ungrateful I We leverage those to try and speak to more people. So we leverage that kind of stuff. But Marie was someone who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to put all this campaign together, she fielded 10s of 1000s of emails, she worked for years to put the campaign directors together, she was very much the heart behind the coach, and she managed the team behind the cart. And, yeah, and so, you know, she deserves a massive acknowledgement and a shout out because, you know, if it wasn't for her, the push for change wouldn't happen. And so today, Marie, and I, and our collective values and visions sort of shine

the light forward to go out into the world and share this message with as many people as we possibly can. Whether that's first responders, police, schools, foundations, wherever we find a good fit, where this message can resonate, that's the audience that we're looking to connect with. And so, you know, that's us today. But but here's the other thing. That's really cool. And I don't even know if you know this, but Maria, and I don't just share our values and our foundation and our and our work to go out and do this speaking stuff.



1:06:12

We also share history. Because Marie's the same girl that I dated in grade 10.



1:06:21

After 28 years, we reconnected. And we two months before the pusher change shoved off, we made it official and became husband and wife. So, yeah, is this the best part, and I know we've been together for that was 12 years ago, or 11 years ago. So if I was to sum it all up, it's like, I believe in possibility. And there's, there's, I don't think there's a person on this earth that could convince me otherwise, because of the story I've lived. Now, that's probably the most challenging thing to believe in. When we look at the world that we're in today, or we look at the life that we're in today, our life and our challenges, our health issues, our past, our baggage, our stuff. But despite all of those things, and not to diminish that in any way, shape, or form, I know that there is something on the other side of the hurt. There is something on the other side of the team. And, and I just want to use my life to be an encourager and to say thank you. Because I didn't pull my my my myself up by my bootstraps. In know, I I'm here today because and I said it earlier, I'm here today because people were there for me at those critical moments in my life where I was incredibly vulnerable. And they invested in me. And so the next time you see that guy or that gal, you know, one of the things that we can do is be you don't have to give them a sandwich or I get asked because Should I give people money to do I buy a sandwich, you can do that you cannot do that. That's your choice. I'm not going to direct you either way. What I would suggest though, is become curiously empathic. What happened before that happened? Because we're never gonna get to the place in our society where we create any kind of systemic change if we don't understand what happened before that happened. Anyway, so I feel like I owe you money for therapy.



James Geering 1:08:37

You're not the first person that said no, I mean, firstly, thank you this is the beautiful thing and I always you know, I will interject if I feel like it's the right point or if someone's come to the the end of their thought process and other times I just am quiet because someone's you know, mentally in that place and that journey is what you were and you know, I I feel like I owe you money back because you know there's so much so much out of this last you know 60 minutes that we've been talking so far but I you underlying with your life stories so many things that I try and talk about that as you said don't get that narrative the kindness in the you know, the first responder community a question I asked a lot about warfighters the kindness and compassion amidst the battle zone. You never hear that but the the amazing good that our men and women in uniform overseas do for each other for the native people for the native animals. You never see that in the news. But I want to go all the way back to that eight year old

boy you talked about with your dad you he was uplifting you felt safe and safety in higher Maslow's hierarchy of needs is is the foundation is the base. I don't think people take the time to take a step back and go change the question, you know what's wrong with you into what happened to you and your timeline. A lot of times that sadly, that trauma started from birth of these families, it didn't didn't have a family dynamic change, and then it got bad, but you did. But it illustrates the fact that we're all blank canvases when they were born. You look at it, you know, a preschool. There's not the racist toddler, you know, and the attic toddler and the sex working toddler. They're the children with their whole life ahead of them. And then things happen. None of them are with crayons, drawing about the bridge, they're going to sleep under one day, or you know, which hypodermic, they're going to choose to put their heroin in their arm. They're full of hopes and dreams, and then life happens to us. And then the other element that I'm actually writing my second book about is that multi generational trauma. Now you take you know, your stepfather, as you said, What happened to him once upon a time he was that toddler too. And there's no way in hell he dreamed of dying alone with no one wanted to claim his body. So I want to thank you, first of all, just you know, leading us through that because the empathy that you were shown along the way is so heartwarming, I think mirrors so many of these religious philosophies that people really do lean towards, you know, that's what these prophets were doing, there was kindness and compassion. But understanding how trauma can affect a person and refine that compassion and empathy so that when you look at the person who's homeless, the person who's an addict, the person who's a sex worker, the person who's in a gang, you know, the person who's the head of a drug corporation that sleeps at night, knowing their products, killing 10s of 1000s of people, we have a mental health crisis. And yet, I feel and we kind of touched on this before, there's very extremist voices that are kind of distracting us from the middle of the road conversation, which is we need to refined those inner children and start healing from the ground up.



1:12:03

Yeah. You know, in some ways, James, I feel grateful that the symptom of my malady was substance use disorder, because there's lots of resources, lots and lots. There's a community there was lots. You know, I was trolling LinkedIn the other day, and I saw this article, and I clicked through and read about Second World War, how did Japan overcome being bombed in Nagasaki and Hiroshima? And one of the things that I delved into was societal, their society's ability to forgive and get to that place where, yeah, I 100% I think that there is a there is a language of divisive pneus that I try my very best on a day to day basis to not go there. You know, in walking across Canada for a cause there are multiple different kinds of voices. There's, you know, really far this way and really far that when you've got what I'm trying to find is, where's the common ground? Where's the bridge? Where's the thing that we can all meet on? Let's have that conversation. I am trying to do the dance too. When I do the keynote speaking, I know that I've got both you and I've got, you know, most people in the middle, but you've got people on either side and to avoid sort of, you know, setting off a claim or it's like, try to find that common ground and let's work there. You know, who doesn't agree that every every child should have safety and a roof over their head? Okay, good. Let's start there. Yeah.



James Geering 1:13:54

So tacking on to that. There was a film made recently, I had a couple of the guys a director, and then one of the guys featured the films called Florian knights, and it was about the kind of motorcycle club that came out the fire service that really was supposed to be, again, a kind of

mental health, positive outlet. There was some, you know, some ways it was perceived and some, some negativity towards that particular club. But the overall thing was really just kind of revealing. I think it was, I think, Toronto and Vancouver if I got that, right. But it really, really kind of showed the homelessness, the addiction, something that I've talked about a lot on this show, and it's interesting because the number of law enforcement officers are actually in agreement is the way that the prohibition on drugs has devolved, has created this empowerment of people that sell drugs, obviously, even over the border, but also as driven anyone who's suffering and they happen to lean into illicit drugs as their coping mechanism into the shadows into the underworld verse As you said, understanding the vast amount of resources that are available through your lands. And it My perspective is, for example, Portugal, Switzerland, some of these that have decriminalized addiction, that doesn't mean you can buy it in the store doesn't mean that you can go and sell it on the streets, it doesn't mean you can smuggle it, those those groups are still being arrested. But the addicts are actually being funneled into well financed, you know, bolstered addiction centers, mental health facilities, job creation programs. So for me, I think it's been an epic failure. And we need to really have some humility and look at the way that some of those countries have done it very successfully. But I mean, I don't want to load the questions. So I will put a you know, a full stop there. What is your perspective on the prohibition side, the way that we look at addiction at the moment? And if you are king for a day, would you change anything?



1:15:58

Yeah. So it's a funny question to answer. Because I've got two perspectives. And one is through my own journey of a couple of decades in sobriety is a zero abstinence model. So if it was my kid, that's sort of what I would want to try to look at, right? However, I think that when you look at data like research that that's what drove the push for change. One of the things I didn't talk about is who we partnered with, we partnered with some really smart people so yeah, it's inspiring. Okay, guys pushing shop. What do you guys really want? Well, here it is. And it was all sort of really great and smart stuff from people who really understand the issue and and have game plans and solutions. So the problem I see is that the DRM without dissuasion is always going to fail. Right? It's like, you d cram, and you make it okay, but you don't shore up. Okay, so let's look at my story. Okay, great. Okay, you're not a bad person, you're sick person got it? No problem. But there's access to the soup kitchen guy, there's access to the the detox center, there was access to the treatment center, there was access to community college, there was employment opportunity in those ongoing service and sport. So let's look at that, because that's the part that's been, you know, whittled down to almost nothing. And so the problem is, especially for first responders, fire ambo, police used to be the call of last resort now the call of first the call of, you know, the first call. And so yeah, I think I think it's, it's, it's really challenging when you can't hold a house up without four solid pillars. If you think of a house is a square, you need four, you need four solid beams, and then a series of trusses to hold that thing up if you've only got one. And that that's the problem is that I think that the CRAM without the dissuasion, and what I'm talking about is what experts are talking about this with Dr. Julian Summers is talking about this is what you know, with, you know, some of these really smart folks who, who research this stuff, not just I'm careful, because I'm just the guy with lived experience. Now lived experiences great perspective. But at the end of the day, when I was building the push for change, I really didn't understand the issues until I sat down and talk to the researchers. I stopped going to talk talk to the data people I talked to the doctor, I talked about people who kind of study these problems and say, Okay, this is what worked over here. This is what worked in Portugal, this is what worked down in in Geelong, Australia, this is what you know. And let's take a look at that just because we can if it worked

over here, it can probably work over here. What are the nuances and differences? Okay, well, we need to consider northern communities and First Nations. I mean, you do this and you do this. So I tend to lean more on what does the data say? And unfortunately, deepgram Without dissuasion is an unfinished sentence.

J James Geering 1:19:15

Yeah, yeah. So basically, you know, as with Portugal, we need to have let's see, what I've seen is that as soon as the same as the the Obama Care, supposedly was supposed to be like, with the health care that I grew up with in England, which is NHS and it wasn't it was a piecemeal attempt at that rather than a complete you know, River. What's the right word? overhaul of an a system with, you know, because people always point well, Colorado is decriminalized that no, they chose a couple of substances. They said, Man, that's all right. But there wasn't a complete overhaul where if you're an addict and you get stopped with anything, that you are then funneled into this educational journey and there are facilities there. funded, built, trained and ready for this large amount of people that we have that are suffering so we can start dealing with that. So this is the thing, I think when I say decriminalize, you will think oh, so I can just go to the store and buy drugs. Now. This is the problem. No, you haven't done any research whatsoever.

1:20:17

The thing with D cram, and this is this is, again, is a misnomer for two decades, in high concentrated areas, whether it's the South Bronx, whether its mission in San Francisco, or the Downtown Eastside, police have not been enforcing those laws Anyways, if they popped you with a paper or two or you know, a gram of crack in your cheek, that they crushed it into the ground and go on with your day. So we've been living in the cramp in these areas. Now, if you got caught and Idaho with, you know, a paper of you, maybe you would pick up a charge for that. So it's it's like we've we've we've been there and you're absolutely right, decriminalization is not legalization. And what some of these other places and other models have done is Yes, they've de crammed and maybe even worked towards legalization. But they've also then poured hundreds of millions of dollars into treatment into mental health into beds into vocational rehabilitation programs, so that they narrowed down dramatically the amount of people who are in need of an emergency response to go from 100% down to say five or seven or 15%. It frees up all of those other resources for police, fire ambulance, health care courts. Right? It's the same with it's the same kind of idea with a housing first housing first model is let's take the most chronic and vulnerable people and house them. And if we do that, yeah, it might cost us 3040 grand a year to do that. But they're costing 150 to \$200,000, in municipal, provincial and federal taxes anyway. So it's actually a good argument to somebody who's a fiscal conservative, because it's pragmatic, it's not to forget about whether you think this is the right thing to do, or it's the good thing to do when you want to be compassionate to help John or Jane, it actually makes sense because it's pay me now or pay me later.

J James Geering 1:22:17

With irony that parallels a conversation I have a lot on here about especially the fire department work week. So in America, I think it kind of mirrors in in Canada, but certainly here in the US. We project this facade that the firefighters have this amazing schedule only work a

handful of days a month, and it's you know, the rest of the time is vacation and time with the kids. But actually, there's a 56 hour work week. So they say is one day on two days off? Well, it's 24 hours, that's not one day of work for most normal people. It's three crammed together, I mean, outside of obviously extra hours and entrepreneurialship. But I mean as far as being in a high stress environment that's three days crammed together, and then they have one day between them three days crammed together one day. And so we have cancer and heart disease and suicide and addiction and, you know, testosterone in the toilet and relationship breakdowns? And the answer is to actually bolster the fire service the same way as we say, you know, Wayne Gretzky wasn't not sleeping every third day. He had even back then strength conditioning coaches and nutritionists and rest and recovery was important. And that's how he was able to be the the athlete that he was, but the person in Toronto is going to roll out of a bed at three in the morning after alarm goes off in the air, and they're going to have to climb 10 flights of stairs with 100 pounds of gear and then go look for someone's child. You know, that's okay to work this work week. And the argument is simply, it should be compassion. I care because my first responders are dying. That should be the end of the conversation. I'm an altruistic leader and I invest in my people. But more often than not, that's not enough, which I fail to understand. But regardless, the other side then is the the economic side, if you actually analyze the cost for the workman's comp claims, the medical retirements Yeah, the line of duty deaths, the mistakes we make because we're so tired. The lawsuits that come from that, you know, the overtime to cover these these spots. You're bleeding money as a city and a county, but it's having that courageous leader that goes I may not look good in this budget year, but my city or my county is going to thank me 10 years from now because we're going to be saving money hand over fist and reopen a lot of these fire stations and put the fourth person back in that fire engine rather than this. I just want to look good and to get my Christmas bonus mentality that I see in a lot of and I'm using air quotes leadership that you know, is just insanity doing the same thing expecting different results.



1:24:49

The thing that you said is to find that courageous leader and I don't like to be negative, but good luck, because they're their few and far between. And that's because the way the system is, is that we look, if Twitter was in charge, or maybe not twitter then sets off a whole bunch of things. But if, if, if the corporation was in charge of the return on investment was some of the social problems solved like that, they will be solved in, in six months. But we've got, we've got a lack of accountability in and leadership. Because it's cycles, right? It's like, I'm only going to be a chief for this long, or I'm only going to be in an MLA for this long, or I'm only going to be a mayor for this long, or I'm only going to be a congressman for this long. And so it's these four years, six year cycles, two year cycles. And you can't fix a 20 year problem with one person and a four year cycle. Because they know as soon as they they kind of go in that direction. That's it, it's political suicide, they're just gonna get hammered. So I don't know what the solution is. But I agree with you 100%. It's like, the problem is, and we had this in the push for change. So people said, What are you pushing for, and we set early detection and prevention or youth at risk, get at them before they cycle out of school, keep them in school, get them the mental health supports that they need, get them housed, if that's what they need, get them the counseling, get them the addiction, whatever it is that they need, so they don't cycle out of school, because once a kid pops out of school, now they become difficult to connect in the community. So ultimately, our entire message boils down to prevention. Prevention isn't sexy. Right? homeless shelters are sexy. But that's the problem. And that, that what that's the microcosm of health care, that's a microcosm of what you're talking about. It's like going

upstream. Doesn't seem sellable. It's hard, because it's it's abstract. It's like you want to invest in what? And so it becomes it becomes difficult and finding those those those really awesome champions who really get it, who are going to run it up the hill. Yeah, I've been fortunate I met some I've met a couple of really neat fire, and police leaders who get it. And they're driving. And like, the fact that the Ontario Provincial Police got behind us, a charity that represented youth at risk was absolutely like, if you would have asked me, I would have said no way that they were, they weren't even on my radar, but they got behind it because it was a perfect fit for what they're championing on mental health, about their community engagement. Internally, there was there was a lot of really good stuff there. And the senior leadership of the organization, both then and now understands those pieces really, really well. Yeah.

J

James Geering 1:28:03

Beautiful. Well, I want to hit one more topic, and then we'll get to some closing questions, because I know we've got about 25 minutes left. You you have this amazing growth, and then you kind of underlying what I've heard a lot, you know, I was very successful. After I came the app, the other side of you know, mental crisis acts, but only on paper, I felt unfulfilled, and you know, now you find the service element. And now you know, you're getting this real soul nurturing growth at the same time. In the mental health conversation, I feel like, you know, we were kind of there now with opening up, you know, getting rid of the stigma a little bit having these conversations, but I feel there's still a very negative undertone into what what does that look like? What does the other end look like? Well, you know, now I deal with my, you know, my mental health, I've got my dog and, you know, do EMDR every couple of weeks, but I don't hear a lot of conversation about over processing trauma coming out the other end becomes a superpower there's post traumatic growth is it's an exciting thing. And when you have these tools, the empathy and the connection that you can start with other people that you know, you've opened the door for conversations, and you've, you know, sadly that me too got a very negative spin but it is me to like, let me tell you about the shit I've been through. And now all of a sudden other people can act but let me show you what I've been able to do since you know this has become an asset, my scars like the Japanese, you know, the gold glue, look at my scars and fucking proud of my scars. So talk to me about that element, because there's not a part of the conversation that really gets a lot of airtime.

i

1:29:40

I think that if you look at the, the model for moving through trauma or stuff, life happens. There's this big emotional impact. Then we find herself sort of in the gutter, and we're struggling. And then we start having conversations and we begin to work through we muddle through and make new meaning. That's the bridge going from, you know the crap to making new meaning. And I think that that's the conversation that's been had for the last decade and accelerated because of COVID. Alright, so let's talk, let's talk. Okay. The thing is, is that there's another stage, and that's let's do. And that's where you sort of embrace possibility, how can I take all of this and turn it into something? My greatest asset is I know what what living behind a dumpster feels like my greatest asset is being in that I've spoken to over a million kids and various different high schools and capacity and the push for change. And the only thing that causes them to sort of sit still for the first 10 minutes is lived experience. So taking it sort of full circle, sort of like an upside down bell curve, right? It's like, Okay, moving to making, you know, making new meaning, sort of reframing life's greatest challenges. The next question becomes,

what can I do with this? to maybe help someone else? Or what can I do with this to, to continue to heal myself? What could I do with this, that would greatly give me great fulfillment, and joy? And I think those are some of the things that that can be really, really exciting. I'm fortunate, I worked alongside a guy who was a performance psychologist. So he walked me through that stuff, right? Didn't let me didn't let me sit. Right. And by the way, I wouldn't judge anybody who simply made it across the Rubicon and they're there. They're okay. And they're, you know, they're not thinking about harming themselves and they're sober today. Good. Awesome. Massively applaud that. And if that's base camp for you, awesome. But I want to tell you that when you study happiness, you get into stuff like Dr. Martin Seligman stuff and the research they've done. We know that altruism and helping other people is another layer. I was in Detroit two weeks ago, and I spoke at CTI t, which is crisis, I hope I get it, right crisis intervention teams. And this is these are the mental health teams that work alongside police, law enforcement, to deescalate and create positive outcomes. So it's kind of the heart of my story, what Scotty did, and I spoke to 14 or 1500 people. Now, 1520 years ago, that would have been a really scary thing to do to stand up in front of those people and share the story I just shared with you, because you've got to be vulnerable. But I'm telling you the currency on the back end of that, I'm riding high for days, knowing that, you know, I had an impact, and I get a chance now, with every day that I've got left to go out in the world and make the world a better place. I take the worst part of me, and I use it to bring out the best in others. What a joy that is. You know, and when I'm when I'm thinking about fire professionals, or police or first responders or military, the one common theme I see is a deep connection to core values. This isn't not to beat up on accounting or writing code for computers. But it's a it's a different kind of job. And it's a different kind of calling. And when you get into asking that question, how can I take this you know, shit, and turn it into diamonds? How can I take this and create possibilities? How can I share this, this experience and the thing I've found James is addicts disease, it's accelerated my climb up. You know that pyramid of self actualization that Maslow talks about? This is the point of self actualization when you actually able to take all of that stuff. So to summarize, it's like, yeah, we need to talk let's talk let's talk and let's do stigma. But then it's like let's do what can we do? Can we do with this? And that's the stuff that I don't know when I'm when I'm trolling social. That's what I like to see. You know, the Navy SEALs swim in the Hudson River. That's awesome. Yeah, the good doo doo doo. And how rewarding is that for the volunteers, the people that are doing it in the people that are watching it.

 James Geering 1:34:31

Absolute Absolutely. Well, a few closing questions and before I let you go the very first one, is there a book or other books that you love to recommend? It can be related to our discussion today or completely unrelated?

 1:34:47

Oh, gosh, so many. I mean, I'm looking at a shelf right now full of books and but I don't want to be Right. I think I would like to reframe the question and say the book that I've read recently that had the most impact was James clears atomic habits. And I really like James clears atomic habits on creating change without all the personal development, hubbub. This is a book that teaches you how to actually get your feet moving towards creating sustainable change. It's systematic. It's simple, and it works. I like that book a lot. And then I don't know what else I mean, I have some of my business books that I cherish. I like thinking Grow Rich by Napoleon

Hill. How to Win Friends and Influence People, by Win Friends and Influence People by Carnegie, Carnegie, Dale Carnegie. I also like a guy as a man thinketh and all gosh, now I'm gonna forget the author's names James, I think, as a man thinketh Yeah, I tend to I tend to lean towards personal development stuff stuff, and I like to read stuff that's 50 or 100 years old. Because it's not trying to sell me a weekend seminar. And it's usually it's usually bang on I mean, some things that we've learned a little bit more about, but

 James Geering 1:36:24

beautiful. Well, what about movies and documentaries, any of those that you

 1:36:28

love? I mean, I like there's a couple inspirational movies that I like watching over and over again, I like October sky. I like Rudy. There's a beautiful story behind Rudy, you know what else I'm a sucker for. And I know, some of you might laugh at this one, but rocky one. Gosh, I love that movie. And there's a beautiful story inside the story of rocky one. And Sylvester Stallone, this guy who's five, six, who saw himself as an action figure. And nobody else saw that and that anyways, I won't ruin it. You can Google it and read the story about Sylvester Stallone trying to sell that script. With him as the actor. They don't want him but and so it's kind of like the resilience story of and then him as a screenplay actor. There's a resilient story. I like I like things that activate inspiration. Because when I activate inspiration, it gets my feet moving towards something, it helps me have the courage to take that hill or to take that next action. That's what I'm doing as a speaker is to try and get people inspired. There's no such thing as a motivational speaker. If they are they would they would be violent in nature, because motivation is to move someone from one space to another against their will. That's there's no I don't think there's motivational speakers. It's a misnomer. There's inspirational speakers, and people that elevate your emotional level, and get you to say, Hey, I could try that. Or I could do and then you go out you do a little thing and you do a little thing and who I feel good. And then you do another little thing. And then you have momentum because your emotional cheated. status changed. And now you begin moving in the right direction. So yeah, I like stuff. That's that's kind of motive.

 James Geering 1:38:18

Beautiful. Yeah. The term life coach I struggle with to like we've all just been through one so far. So I'm still waiting for the, you know, the Buddhist has had multiple that can prove it and be like, Okay, I've had 20 lives. Let me tell you how not to be a cockroach. Okay, now I'm listening. All right. Well, then the next question, is there a person that you recommend to come on this podcast as a guest to speak to the first responders, military and associated professionals in the world?

 1:38:43

Through to people? Yeah, Alan Keller is a friend of mine and mental health advocate at a Saskatchewan. I love him to pieces. He and I have worked together. I've heard his story. He's, he's he's really humble. He's been through some some stuff. And I just love the work that he's

he's, he's really humble. He's been through some some stuff. And I just love the work that he's doing. And then Dr. Shawn Richardson, is a premier sports psychologist. He actually works in the footy and works in Aussie footy, down in, he lives in Brizzy, Brisbane, and he's taught me I mean, the recovery community gave me a foundation. Sean Sean's substratum showed me how to fly at 37,000 feet. This is a guy who's whose ideas and intellectual property drives the best coaches and the best athletes in the world to go out and achieve possibility. So a lot of what I share is sort of a my my version of living it but it's Sean's IP. Beautiful, brilliant stuff. And he's the one who's taught me you know, that whole upside down bell curve and yeah,

 James Geering 1:39:54

brilliant. Well, I'd love to get both of them on if you're able to help that'd be amazing. Yeah, done easy. You All right, well then the very last question before we make sure everyone knows where to find you and the Skid Row CEO platform, what do you do to decompress when you're not pushing a shopping trolley? 9000 kilometers.

 1:40:13

ice baths, ice bath. Actually, I joking about ice bath. But actually I do use like spare ice baths to actually trigger a vagus nerve. They help deal with depression and anxiety. I do a lot of exercise. For me exercise is a component but also diet and sleep. So both Maria and I went plant based she six years ago, I went through three and a half years ago, not for reasons that some might think I did it really because I was doing Ironman competition stuff I was doing like really, really heavy endurance. And I found that eating green helped me recover a lot quicker. So to decompress, I meditate. I listened to high vibration music, I tried to limit social media, and news, especially I'll check in with myself emotionally and mentally and go, How am I doing right now. And that good, okay, though, maybe you want to stay away from indulging in that in the in the news of the of the day, stay away from that until maybe you go out and you do your run. So it's a combination of things and also recognize it some days, it's going to be easy. I'm gonna get up, I'm gonna sail through that day and other days, I'm going to have to use five tools in the toolbox, I'm going to need to write I'm going to need to go to a meeting and rat myself out, talk to people and say, I'm not feeling good. You know, listen to the listener Marconi union, which is a song that was designed to calm your, your waves, I try to meditate and breathe. So there's there's a whole pile of things, I think that it's not one thing, you want to have a really robust toolbar. So you got multiple things to use. And it also depends on where am I? I'm at stage one, or am I on stage? You know, I need somebody standing beside me right now.

 James Geering 1:42:03

Have you ever heard of a technology called New calm and you see ALM? No, I'm not familiar with it. So I'm going to send you an interview I did. I mean, just from a an intellectual or business, all those areas, I think you'd find it interesting. But you talked about the frequency. This is a technology. And it's the only one that has the patent and everything in the entire world. But it was used by NASA and navy seals and all these things. But they've just now with the smartphone technology be able to turn it into an app. So us normal people can use it to, but you're listening to music, but underneath they've actually got the frequency. And the doctor behind this, who supposedly is one of the most intelligent men that's ever graced the Earth, as

far as we're aware of initially identified the frequency that you'd be in flow in Theta or Delta, you know, sleep, I mean, all these different things, but then he figured out a way to manipulate that. And so you put on in the downregulation ones, you put on a high mask and a set of headphones, noise cancelling headphones, and you just lie there. And it's passive, which is awesome if people anyone that's tried meditation and struggled a little bit, but then they also have upregulation, ones for focus for you know, runs that kind of thing. But I am not someone that shouts on rooftops about very much, they have to be phenomenal for me. And like the shirt I'm wearing now foundation training for back health and incredible of shower all day long for years and years. But new calm is my new thing. So I'll send you that stuff. I think you'd be fascinating because it sounds like you're almost there with what you're doing anyway.



1:43:31

Yeah, I found a bunch of stuff that one of the things is I got mild ADHD, and I got mild dyslexia, which means I have the attention span of a gnat. And though it's like I can get so distracted, so when I'm in airports, and I often am going from conference to conference to conference or whatever, I need to put on something to tune out. But it can't be words, because then I'm listening. And then I'm not it's my, my brain gets all scrambled. But if it's just tone, if it's just music. And I found that some of these like I can listen to them, and I can be in these really intense, chaotic environments. And they don't. I'm just able to kind of Yes, like, I'd be really keen to have a have a look at that for sure.



James Geering 1:44:19

Brilliant. Yeah, I'll send that to you after we're done with this. So for people listening, as you mentioned, you do speak all over the all over the world. I think, you know, if anyone's not moved by the last two hours, then don't even look at the website because you're not going to be moved by anything. But for everyone else that you know is really moved by your story and can see schools, police departments, fire departments and other organizations that would definitely value from there people listening where are the best places to find you online?



1:44:46

Yeah, I've got a website Skid Row ceo.com. And if anyone's listening and wants to find me online, social, I'm on LinkedIn at the Skid Row CEO Joe Roberts. So we're not we're not that deaf. Call to find and I do all kinds of different stuff I do a lot of associations, I work directly with police departments, fire departments, first responders, also do a lot of corporate stuff to healthcare. And I found that one of my greatest leverages is to share the story in the right environment with the right people, is how I can create sort of long term change, I've looked at a whole bunch of things, like I can do anything that I want, but I get the greatest joy out of doing that kind of work. And I always get one or two people that come up to me afterwards, often more than one or two, and they'll say, you know, like, I needed to be here today. I had, you know, copper, come off me, since I've been, you know, 29 years, and you forever changed the way I see this. You know, to me that that's a home run, it's like, find, get people to, you know, see things differently, feel, feel a little differently and honor people for what they do. And, you know, get an opportunity to go somewhere and meet those folks. That to me is blessed. And I love it.

 James Geering 1:46:04

You for which I want to say thank you so much. It's been an amazing conversation. You know, as I always say, every time someone revisit some of the more traumatic areas, whether it's losing your father or you know, what you endured for years after and all the things that happened, since, you know, you are kind of pulling the scab off the wound a little bit, but I know the 1000s of people that are gonna listen to this, it's gonna resonate so deeply. So I want to thank you so much for your courageous vulnerability, and for being so generous with your time and coming on the podcast today.

 1:46:36

Yeah, my pleasure, James. I mean, I appreciate access. You know, I remember somebody asked me, you know, what's the one thing that that you want to pass on? And it's, it's that simple idea that that God gave me on a park bench wherever you are right now. No matter what. There's more in you than then you can see right now. If you have the courage to get up off that bench, take a couple of steps forward. You'll see you'll see what Gus is talking about. You don't just see it, you'll feel it. And I guess you know, that's, that's hope, and I'm happy. I'm happy with that.