

SUNDAY SPECIAL

From Skid Row to CEO

THE COURAGE TO COME BACK

By Lee Bacchus
Staff Reporter

He is no ordinary Joe. Clean-cut in regulation attire of blue shirt and tie, grey wool slacks and wingtip shoes, Joe Roberts differs little from the legions of married-with-children suburban business types who migrate daily between suburb and city.

But that's the "after" Joe. The Joe who's a company president and CEO. The Joe who shares a happy family life with his wife and 10-year-old stepdaughter.

The "before" Joe, the spectre peering out furtively and less than soberly from behind a curtain of stringy hair in the photo, was another species altogether.

"In 1989, I was living under the Georgia Street viaduct," says Roberts, now 37 and living in a large home in Coquitlam. "By the time I was 25, I had been to five times as many funerals as weddings."

The Before Joe was a drug addict and street person. Roberts was on an epic downward spiral that began at eight with his father's death, exacerbated later by an abusive alcoholic stepfather. At nine, Roberts was regularly smoking pot and drinking alcohol.

"The first time I got high, it took me to a place where nobody could get at me — and I enjoyed being there," Roberts says now.

By 16 he had it all — mostly via the pointy end of a needle. Cocaine, heroin. Prescription drugs. Whatever he could score. The spiral came to its nadir in the spring of 1991, when the police were called to the home of Roberts's mother in Midhurst, Ont. Roberts was high, waving around a revolver and threatening suicide. He was arrested, charged and eventually found himself in a detox program.

At this point — and Roberts makes it a pinpoint of July 26, 1991 — he declared himself clean and began building his role as the After Joe — a challenge that earned him this year's Courage to Come Back award for overcoming chemical dependency.

■ **Last book read:** *Who Dares Wins*, by Peter Legge.

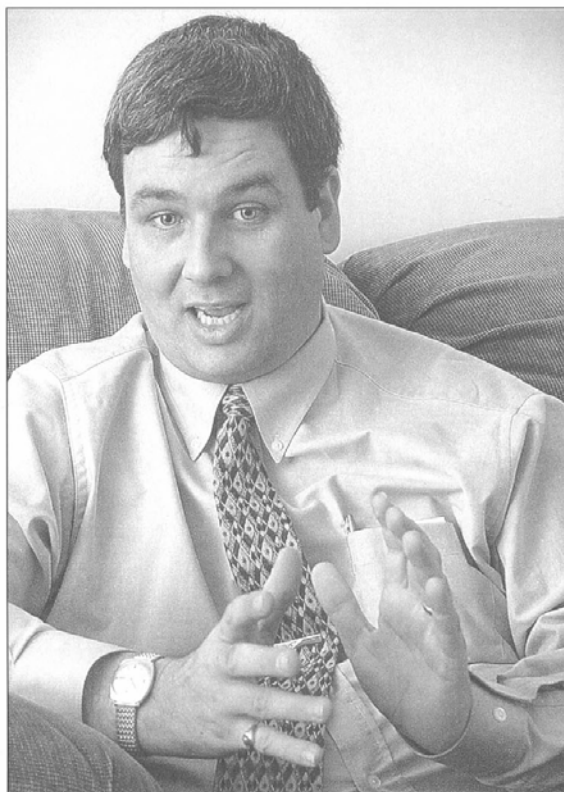
■ **Favorite thing to do on a Saturday night:** Hang out with my wife Jennifer.

■ **Music you could listen to over and over:** Van Morrison.

■ **Favorite spot in the Lower Mainland:** Top of the West Lions — 5,100 feet above Vancouver.

Catch it on TV

Watch Joe Roberts's story on tomorrow's Early News on Global Television at 5 p.m.



Wayne Leldenfrost — The Province

Back in the early 1990s, Joe Roberts was a drug addict who lived under the Georgia Viaduct. Today, he heads a multimedia development company.

"From that day forward, I envisioned a better life for myself," he says.

As Roberts says, he went down quickly and came back up quickly. As part of the Alcohol & Drug Intensive Treatment Program he began business marketing studies at Loyalist College in Belleville, Ont. He made the dean's list and graduated in 1995.

Now there was no stopping him. He adopted heroes: Winston Churchill, Terry Fox, Thomas Edison and Muhammed Ali. He read and listened to mentors of success and self-recovery: Vincent Peale, Robert Schuller, Tony Robbins and Canada Wide

Magazine mogul and motivational speaker Peter Legge.

Roberts began speaking at prisons and rehab institutions about his own recovery. He got a job in sales and paid off tens of thousands of dollars in old loans and debts.

In 1997 he joined Mindware Design Communications, a Burnaby-based multimedia development firm that now employs 15 people with Roberts as president and CEO.

According to his partner and Mindware founder, Dr. Pesi A. Unwalla, it was Roberts's energy that drove the company's success over the past six years.

"His dynamism, integrity and business mind has helped create a sales and marketing mood that is at the root of our success," Unwalla says.

"I transferred a lot of the skills I learned from hustling on the street and applied them to business," Roberts says. "I'm very persistent and determined. I know how to take it on the chin to get things done."

Spend only a few minutes with Roberts and you'll quickly realize the man has the gift of the gab. One part nature ("I've always been outgoing," he says) and perhaps two parts street smarts, Roberts's dynamic delivery has been parlayed into regular gigs as a motivational speaker.

Using his own rags-to-right-stuff story as a springboard, Roberts speaks to business types about confronting and overcoming challenges. And under the umbrella of his own Courage to Change Foundation, Roberts speaks to young people about the perilous road he once walked and the paths to a more fulfilling life.

"Basically, I'm a public speaker because I didn't become a rock star," he jokes.

His presentation is called, "Don't Buy the Lie About Getting High," and he's delivered it to more than 60,000 students across the Lower Mainland.

Roberts says his story, while extreme, still has a universal message.

"There's not a person on this planet who isn't going to go through a rough time at some point in their life," he says.

If all of this isn't enough to acknowledge Roberts's courage to come back from the edge of the abyss, then consider that he has just self-published his own book, a self-help guide called *Seven Secrets to Profit from Adversity* — a theme that Roberts has realized both financially and psychologically. He says in both his speaking and writing, his biggest wish is for people to come away with one overriding message.

"I just want them to think, 'If he can do it, I can do it,'" Roberts says.

■ **Tickets for the Courage to Come Back Gala Awards Dinner on April 24 are available by calling Coast Mental Health Foundation at 604-872-3502, or from the website www.coastfoundation.com.**

The Courage to Come Back celebrates people from all across B.C. who seek to achieve their human potential, despite experiencing mental or physical illness, adversity or injury.

Coast Foundation Society began Courage in B.C. to present hope to all people who face challenges.

In his spare time