

Skid row to CEO

Joe Roberts was a junkie living under a bridge on Vancouver's mean streets
CANADIAN BUSINESS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Joe Roberts got his first lesson in sales at age 7, when he opened a Kool-Aid stand with his younger sister in Midland. He overcame a lousy location — his mother wouldn't let him set up shop on a busy street corner — by riding his bicycle around the neighborhood, yelling "Kool-Aid for sale," while little sister minded the stand.

Flash forward 30 years and Joe, 37, is CEO and president of Mindware Design Communications, a Vancouver-based company that provides multimedia and Web design work and consulting services. Roberts describes himself as the "front man" for Mindware, the guy who does the marketing and heads the sales team. His sales skills are formidable: he likes to tell the story about how, early in his business career, he managed to sell a bulk order of frozen meat to a beef farmer. "To make that sale, I ended up substituting the beef with pork and chicken," he chuckles. "That sale made me a bit of a legend among my co-workers."

Roberts made his first six-figure salary by the time he was 34, and Mindware, which he runs with partner Pasi Unwalla, now brings in sales of about \$1 million annually. Not too shabby for someone who hasn't yet hit 40. But between that promising start as a child and his success today, Roberts treaded a dark, tortuous path — one that was riddled with drug addiction, petty crime and surviving by his wits on the mean streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. He also spent months at a time living under a viaduct, because he blew his welfare cheque on drugs instead of rent. "The funny thing about Vancouver's Eastside is that the problems have become so common, no one really looks at you if you sleep outside, or you look dirty," he says. "There's a certain acceptance of doom and hopelessness."

It's that sense of despair that Roberts now wants to erase in others who, for whatever reason, are too afraid or in too much turmoil to think big and build a better future. He has talked to thousands of high school students in a presentation he calls "Don't buy the lie about getting high." And through his Web site, joeroberts.ca, he has developed a business as a motivational speaker, giving presentations to government agencies, companies and organizations. "I want to inspire change," says Roberts. "There are so many people with potential who get into a rut, living small, quiet, hopeless lives. I tell them it doesn't have to be that way."

It wasn't an easy decision to publicize his past, Roberts admits. "I was so afraid to tell my story, so gripped with fear that people are not going to want to do business with Mindware." In fact, he says most people have been sympathetic. "The most conservative-

looking businesspeople would come up to me, saying they had no idea what I had been through," he says. "Or people would tell me their own stories."

There's no doubt that the details of Roberts' rise from skid row to CEO are compelling. He had begun using drugs at age 9 (pot and booze), a year after his father died and the arrival of an abusive, alcoholic stepfather. "I was looking for something safe, and drugs put me in that bubble," he explains. Spending his teen years hanging out with the "stoner" crowd in the Ontario communities of Midland and Barrie, where his family later moved, Roberts left home at 16, living on his own while trying to finish school, but dropped out 18 months later. He held a number of menial jobs but, as his drug habit grew, he became unemployable.

Roberts made his way to Vancouver in 1986, hoping for a "geographical cure" to his problems. "I figured that if I got away from certain people, that my life would be better," he says. Instead, he says he graduated to "hard-core junkie," expanding his drug repertoire to cocaine and heroin. He also got involved in petty crimes to support his \$350-a-day drug habit that landed him in jail for short stays. "Within three months of hitting Vancouver, any semblance of hope faded," Roberts says. He eventually found himself living for long periods under the Georgia Street viaduct "There were a bunch of us — maybe a half dozen or so at any one time — who would show up there to sleep, since the steam pipe made it warm," he recalls. Roberts lived this way for three years.

In 1989, his mother, Arlene Quesnelle, came to visit him in Vancouver, and — horrified at what she saw — convinced him to come home to Ontario for a visit. "She was smart; she didn't say 'Come back and get clean'," Roberts says. "That would have scared me off." Back in Barrie, he made several attempts to get off drugs, but he'd inevitably go back to using. "Once you get into heroin, you're a puppet," he explains. "It doesn't matter what kind of day you're having, you're going to get high. Because if you don't, the physical consequences are too hard."

In the spring of 1991, the situation spiralled completely out of control. Roberts, high on drugs, waved a revolver (it wasn't loaded) in his mother's basement and threatened suicide. The local police were called but, as Roberts now puts it, he "got a big break" from the cop who handled the incident. "Instead of treating me like a criminal, he treated me like a sick person," he says. Soon after, a chastened Roberts embarked on a long healing process. He tried a number of treatment programs, but things didn't really start to click until he entered Serenity House, a residential detox program based in Belleville. The program was supposed to last six weeks, but Roberts stayed six months until he knew he was pointed in the right direction.

Then, supported by a 12-step program, he decided to go back to school, and took a high school equivalency test that allowed him to go straight to community college. He initially tried to enrol in a social work program — "I wanted to take the gift I had been given and change the lives of others" — but was rejected. So he began business marketing and sales studies at Belleville's Loyalist College. Turns out the former Kool-Aid vendor and sales were a natural fit. Roberts left Loyalist with two diplomas, a grade point average of 3.94

and his name on the dean's list. "When I took away the drugs and the partying and added 10 years of maturity, I learned I had a pretty good working mind."

After graduating, Roberts took jobs in everything from print advertising and magazine subscription sales to pushing those frozen meat contracts. The bug for sales really hit when, after convincing people of the merits of buying frozen meat in bulk, he realized there was money to be made. Sales also offered a chance "to plot my own destiny and perhaps start my own business," he says. "I wanted to be the guy who made the decisions." By then, Belleville (population: 46,000) was getting "too small" for Roberts and his ambitions.

So, in 1996, five years after getting clean of drugs, Roberts loaded up his '82 Honda Civic and headed back to Vancouver, where he landed a job with Minolta Canada, selling photocopiers. Lanny Flores, the manager at Minolta who hired him, says of Roberts: "When you get someone who is composed, confident and hungry, and who really wants the job, you usually get a winner." A year later, Roberts switched to a small audio-visual company called Aurora Visual, where he met Unwalla. The two decided to go into business together, Unwalla on the technical and creative side of things, Roberts on the sales and marketing end. "He's got a very positive attitude and goes hard for the sale," says Unwalla. "You just have to admire what he's been able to do."

Mindware has seen its sales grow by 800 per cent since starting up in January, 1999. It employs up to 15 people, some permanent, others on contract, depending on projects. Customers include Slocan Forest Products and the Business Development Bank of Canada.

A few months ago, Roberts realized just how far he had come when he found an old letter — a list of goals — he had mailed to himself back in 1991. "I got real weepy, because of the 56 goals I had listed, 48 of them had come to pass and some are the type of things you don't necessarily have control of — like finding a wife and having children." (He has been married to his wife, Jennifer, for three years, and is stepfather to her 10-year-old daughter; they're expecting a child together in October.)

What Roberts realized is that "life doesn't always give you what you want. It gives you what you negotiate for yourself."

Spoken like a true entrepreneur — and survivor.