

Local

Teenager has stepped in to run Truman's grocery store

By ROBERT FRANKLIN, The Associated Press

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TRUMAN, Minn. - Nick Graham has the manner of an old-time, small-town grocery store owner, greeting customers by name, helping them carry out the goods, sometimes making deliveries to homes of the elderly. There's not much old-time about Nick Graham, however. He's 17.

A high school senior, Graham has become something of a hometown hero by buying and, a month ago, reopening the only grocery store in Truman, a southern **Minnesota** town of about 1,200 people.

He has hired a full-time manager, Amy Werner, a former day-care provider and deli manager, and a part-time worker, but he is usually at his Main Street Market after school until closing at 6:30 p.m. The store is open all day Saturdays and Sunday mornings, too.

The grocery had been closed for several months, and "we went without," said Tim Parker, a former high school dean of students who was picking up hamburger, lettuce and tomatoes for supper one day last week. "It's devastating for a small town to be without a grocery store."

Without the store, said Todd Hoppe, "I would have to drive to Fairmont to get something for supper."

That's a 24-mile round trip for most Truman residents.

Besides, Arlene Peterson said of Graham, "We love him. ... He's the friendliest person in town."

The town has been home to Graham's family for a long time - six generations, he said. His father was killed in a snowmobile accident when Nick was 4, and he moved with his mother to **Iowa** when he was 7. He returned intermittently to the **turkey** farm run by his grandmother and late grandfather and now by an uncle. He lives with Dot Graham, his grandmother.

The teenager has done farm work and **construction** work for several years, he said, and saved "just about everything."

So he said he doesn't need a mortgage to buy the building, which - with several commercial vacancies on Main Street and with **Wal-Mart** building a store in Fairmont - he's getting at well below appraised value. Graham wouldn't name the price, but part of the complex transaction includes a \$22,000 passthrough lease arrangement with the nonprofit Truman Development Corp. That agreement runs until Graham turns 18, said the group's president, Michael Tennyson.

The young entrepreneur has an "unbelievable mind," acts quickly and "he's wired differently than anybody I've ever met," Tennyson said.

"He's a pretty smart businessman (who) wants to be doing something all the time," said Dave Utermarck, a teacher and coach of Truman High's nine-man **football** team, which included Graham as a guard and defensive end.

Barb Mager, another of his teachers, said the grocery was "kind of a dream he had all year. ... He thought through this whole process. He did a lot of research."

Customers credit Graham with brightening the store, increasing stock and offering some popular meat and bakery items.

"I didn't want to see downtown Truman deteriorate," he said. "I can't count the number of people who helped stock shelves, price items and clean this place up" before the Nov. 3 opening.

He's not talking college right now, but wants to see how the store goes. "I want to be part of this community, long term," he said.

Grocery stores have gone out of business in many small towns, along with such other staples as hardware stores and drug stores (Graham said he hopes someone will reopen Truman's closed pharmacy).

Nevertheless, said Jamie Pfuhl, executive director of the Minnesota Grocers Association, hometown loyalty can help grocers compete, especially when they find a niche with specialty products such as meat, baked goods and a deli.

Dave Rode, president of a Truman company that builds trenching machines, said that "as times have changed, Truman's had to try and change," and Graham has helped do that.

"The biggest thing is, he's selling convenience," Rode said. "Everybody's enthusiastic. He's got a lot of support in town."

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