

17-year-old reopens Truman's Main Street Market

By Robb Murray

The Free Press

TRUMAN — He's not even supposed to be here. It's a Friday morning and Nick Graham is supposed to be in a classroom studying history or algebra with the rest of the 17-year-olds in town, not greeting customers by name at a grocery.

But there he is, waving an enthusiastic arm at Jack who came to check out the meat department, or smiling big for Arlene or Viola or any of the other ladies pushing around shopping carts full of milk, apples, bread and soup. He rings up their groceries at the till. Even carries the sacks to their cars.

Graham is a bit of a hero around here. And his presence at the grocery says a lot about why most will forgive him for a little truancy these days.

He's not just greeting customers. He's shaking hands with his customers, the first people who came through the doors of his grocery on opening day. That's right. Graham, having saved his money for years raising turkeys, is the unlikely proprietor of Main Street Market.

"I've saved every dime I've ever made," Graham says, when asked how in the world a 17-year-old kid who is still in high school could possibly pull together enough money to buy a business. "And there's no reason a town of 1,400 people can't have a grocery store."

Graham, whose father was killed in a snowmobile accident when Graham was 4, was born and raised in Truman. His mother remarried and moved to Iowa, and that's where Graham has lived for 10 years. But he decided he wanted to return to Minnesota, and came back to Truman for his senior year.

Two months ago, the town's grocery, which had been struggling, finally closed. Graham did his homework and figured out what he had to do to make it work. He purchased the building and took possession Oct. 1.

And in the weeks that followed, Graham experienced the kind of support you might expect from small-town folks who can't stand to see the abandonment of their downtowns.

High school buddies, other business owners and folks from town all pitched in to get the store ready for business.

They lugged merchandise in and helped Graham clean up the place. Graham, who missed a few hours of school to be there on opening day, had in fact missed a handful of days of school throughout October as opening day approached.

On Friday, 34 days after he acquired the place, Graham was officially in business. The doors opened at 8 a.m. All morning long, a steady stream of customers came through the door, most of whom had already heard tell of the young man with plans to bring a grocery back to Truman.

"In a small town, you know everybody," Graham says. "You know their dog. You know what they had for supper last night."

One of those people was Viola Vaux, an elderly resident who describes herself as "blind," and who needs the help of a neighbor to get errands done, including grocery shopping.

Vaux came to the store Friday with friend Laura Kueker. They're both thrilled that someone brought the store back.

"We're all getting older," says Vaux, who plans to phone in her grocery orders on Tuesdays, and have Graham deliver them to her home on Wednesdays. "It's so important to have a store in town."

Without a grocery in Truman, most residents drive to Fairmont to shop. It's only 12 miles, but losing that downtown store two months ago wasn't just an inconvenience. A quick drive down Truman's main drag reveals more empty storefronts than residents would like to see. Initiative like Graham's then, is the kind that inspires people.

That's why people came out to help him. And that's why they came to opening day.

"It's a Bill Gates! He's unreal!" says Arlene Carlson. "Where else are you gonna find in any other county, a 17-year-old to take on a challenge like that?"

There was never a span of more than a few minutes where the door wasn't swinging open with more customers

coming in.

“Hey, Maxine!” he says, waving to another customer.

And a few minutes later, with a calm and confidence in his voice that defies ... “Hey, Bonnie!” he says, and steps toward her to place a hand on the shoulder of petite, older woman, “Your Aspergum will be in on Monday.”

Not everyone in the store knows him. Kim Frey moved to town in 1979, and remembers the days when Truman had not only a grocery, but a successful hardware store, two restaurants and busy downtown.

She admits that, when it comes to powershopping, she’ll still compare prices and will probably shop at larger stores in bigger towns. But she’ll shop at the Main Street Market, she says, as much as she can.

“I hope this works,” she says.

After meeting Graham, who lives with his grandparents in Truman, it’s hard to not buy into the optimism he brings to this endeavor. His boyish charm is authentic, and everyone he talks to returns the smiles Graham spreads around so liberally.

“When I moved back to Truman, I never envisioned doing this in my wildest dreams,” Graham says.

“Audrey!” he says. He walks over to her and she, shopping list in hand, gives him a hug, and then grabs a cart and heads down the produce aisle.

He’d been here for a couple of hours, showing people around, greeting friends, making new ones. But eventually, after helping load about \$50 worth of groceries into the back seat of a customer’s car, Graham grabbed a donut from inside, wolfed it down and headed down the sidewalk.

He was greeted by an elderly gentleman and his wife. The man grabbed Graham for a firm handshake, patted him on the back and told him what a swell thing he was doing for the town.

Then Graham, Truman’s newest hero, had to get back to school.

Copyright © 1999-2006 cnhi, inc.

Photos



Nick Graham (right) meets with customers Laura Kueker (left) and Viola Vaux on opening day of his new grocery. The Free Press



Kendra Urban, friend of owner Nick Graham, helps carry groceries to a customer’s car Friday, the first day of operation for Truman’s Main Street Market. The Free Press



Nick Graham took possession of this building in downtown Truman Oct. 1. Since then, he and a bunch of helpers from the community have turned it into the town’s newest business, Main Street Market. The Free Press