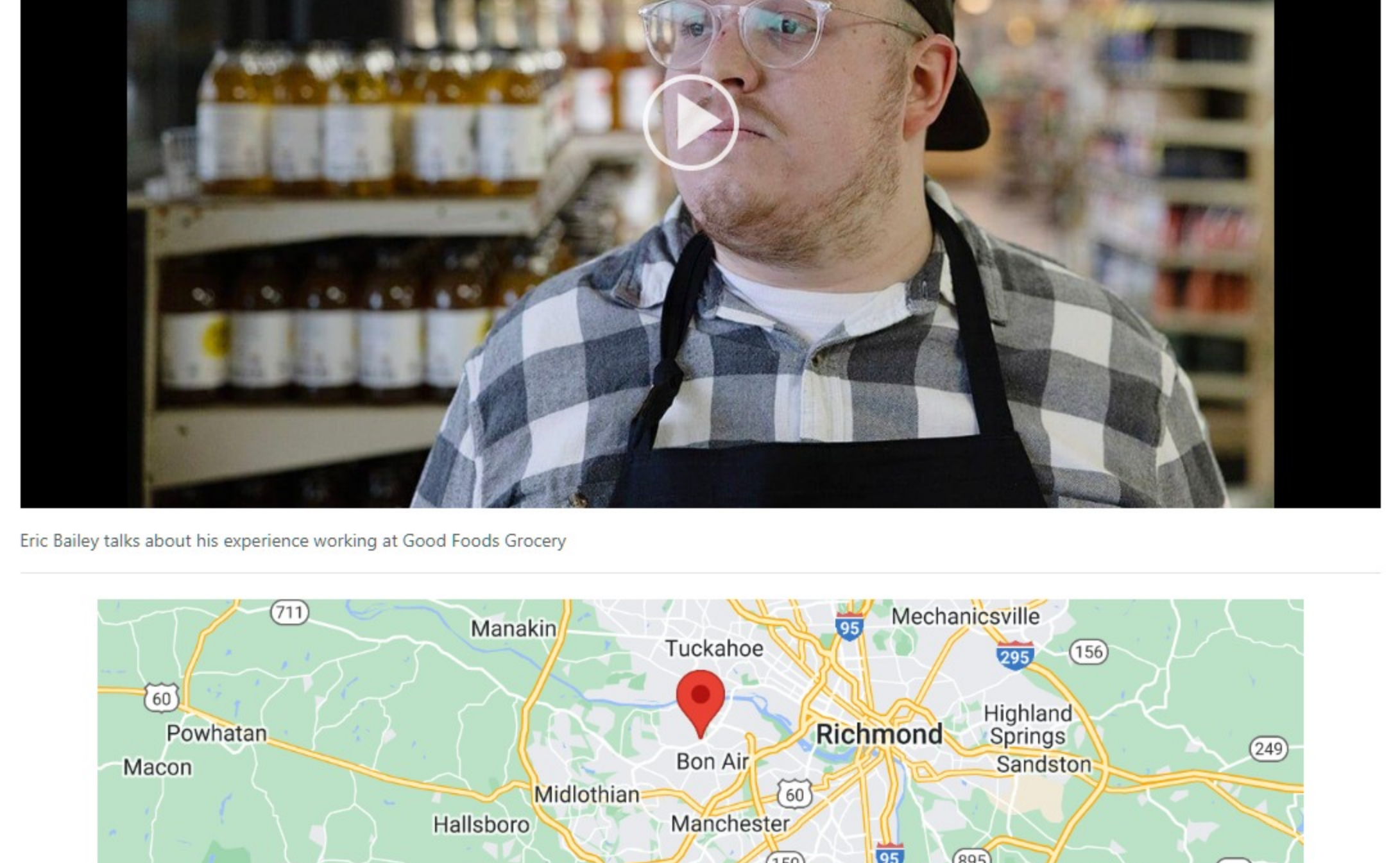
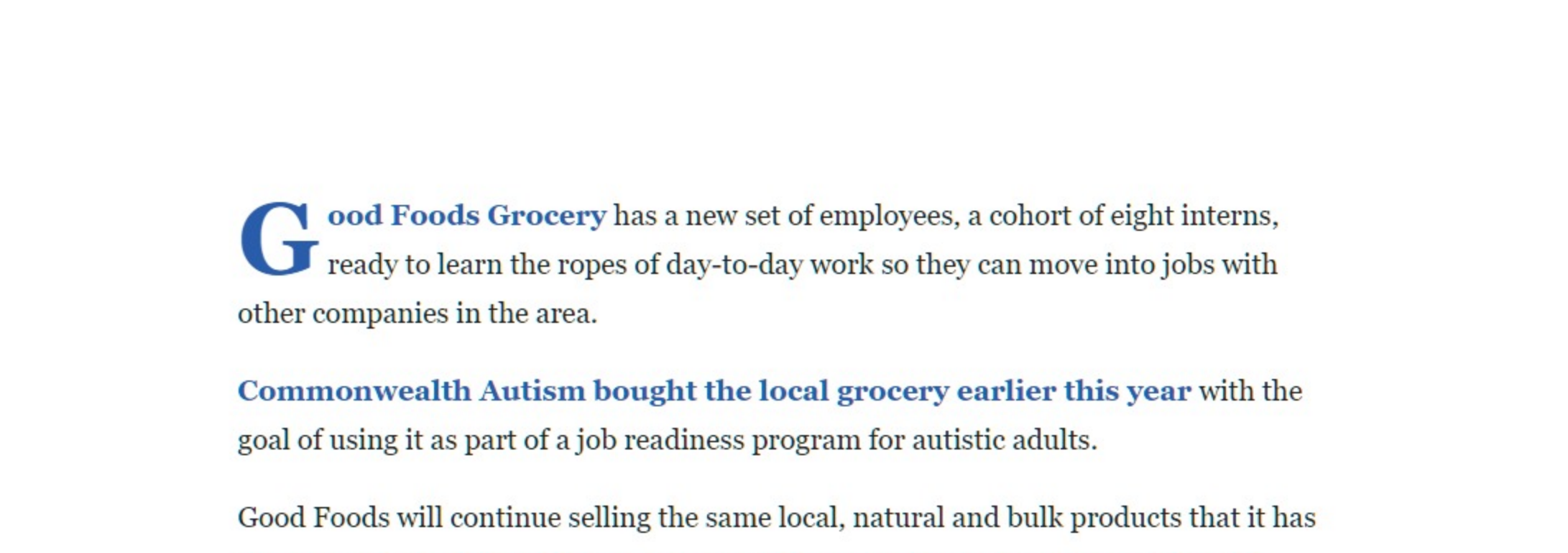


# Good Foods Grocery gets people with autism workforce ready

Sean Jones Mar 4, 2024 1



Eric Bailey talks about his experience working at Good Foods Grocery



Good Foods Grocery is located inside the Stony Point Shopping Center at 3062 Stony Point Road in Richmond.

**G**ood Foods Grocery has a new set of employees, a cohort of eight interns, ready to learn the ropes of day-to-day work so they can move into jobs with other companies in the area.

**Commonwealth Autism bought the local grocery earlier this year** with the goal of using it as part of a job readiness program for autistic adults.

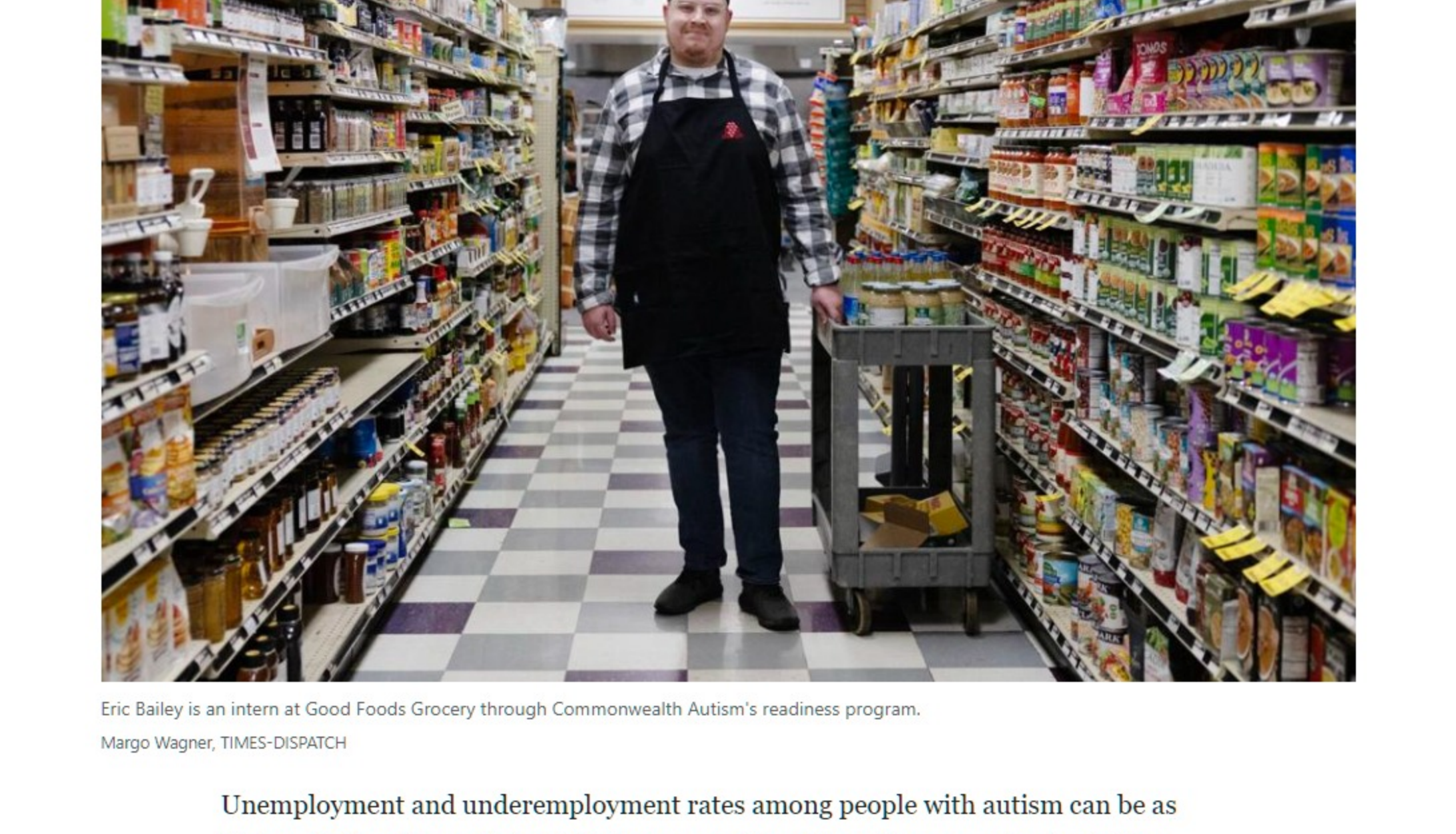
Good Foods will continue selling the same local, natural and bulk products that it has always stocked, while adding Commonwealth Autism's mission to put adults with autism to work.

"We've had people shopping here for years. It feels like a family environment among the people who work here as well as the customers," said Tyler Hart, president and CEO of Henrico County-based Commonwealth Autism. "We're not reducing any of the full-time staff and are really adding to the workforce and building the program on what was already here."

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Good Foods Grocery is located inside the Stony Point Shopping Center at 3062 Stony Point Road in Richmond.



Eric Bailey is an intern at Good Foods Grocery through Commonwealth Autism's readiness program. Margo Wagner, TIMES-DISPATCH

Unemployment and underemployment rates among people with autism can be as high as 85%, with nearly half of all 25-year-olds with autism never having held a paying job, according to Commonwealth Autism. When in school, students typically have a routine and an adequate support network to help them through daily life. That supporting environment often "falls off a cliff" after graduation, Hart said.

Interns will staff several different positions across a three-month internship period including cashier, stocking shelves and food service, among others. The program starts slowly with interns working around three to four hours per day, two to three days per week and slowly ramping up.

At the end of the internship, Commonwealth Autism will work to place the interns with employers in the area.

"Once placed with a permanent employer, Commonwealth Autism can help with follow-ups," Hart said. "When you get past 90 days, they often become very loyal and very trusted employees."

## A new center for Commonwealth Autism

As a business, Good Foods has been growing in sales since it was purchased. Groceries can traditionally be a tough business with tight margins, but Good Foods is turning about an 8% profit, Hart said. Those funds are reinvested in programs for the nonprofit, which has traditionally relied on grants and fundraising for survival.

"Initially the idea was that if we get close to break-even that would be good," Hart said. "The mission is to put adults with autism to work ... then the business was actually generating revenue that we could reinvest."



Good Foods Grocery operates in the Stony Point Shopping Center off Huguenot Road at Forest Hill Avenue in South Richmond. GREGORY J. GILLIGAN, TIMES-DISPATCH

Good Foods Grocery is not only the site of Commonwealth Autism's program, but is set to become the center for all of its operations. It is in the process of closing on the purchase of a building on an adjacent property at the Stony Point Shopping Center. The group plans to move its headquarters there from its previous location at 4108 E. Parham Road.

The long-term plan includes the construction of a commercial kitchen at the new headquarters that can be used to teach a bigger set of job skills while making products for local companies. That kitchen program may also open up to teaching people with disabilities other than autism.

Ultimately, the move will accommodate the nonprofit's overall growth, which Hart said has been increasing about 50% year over year.

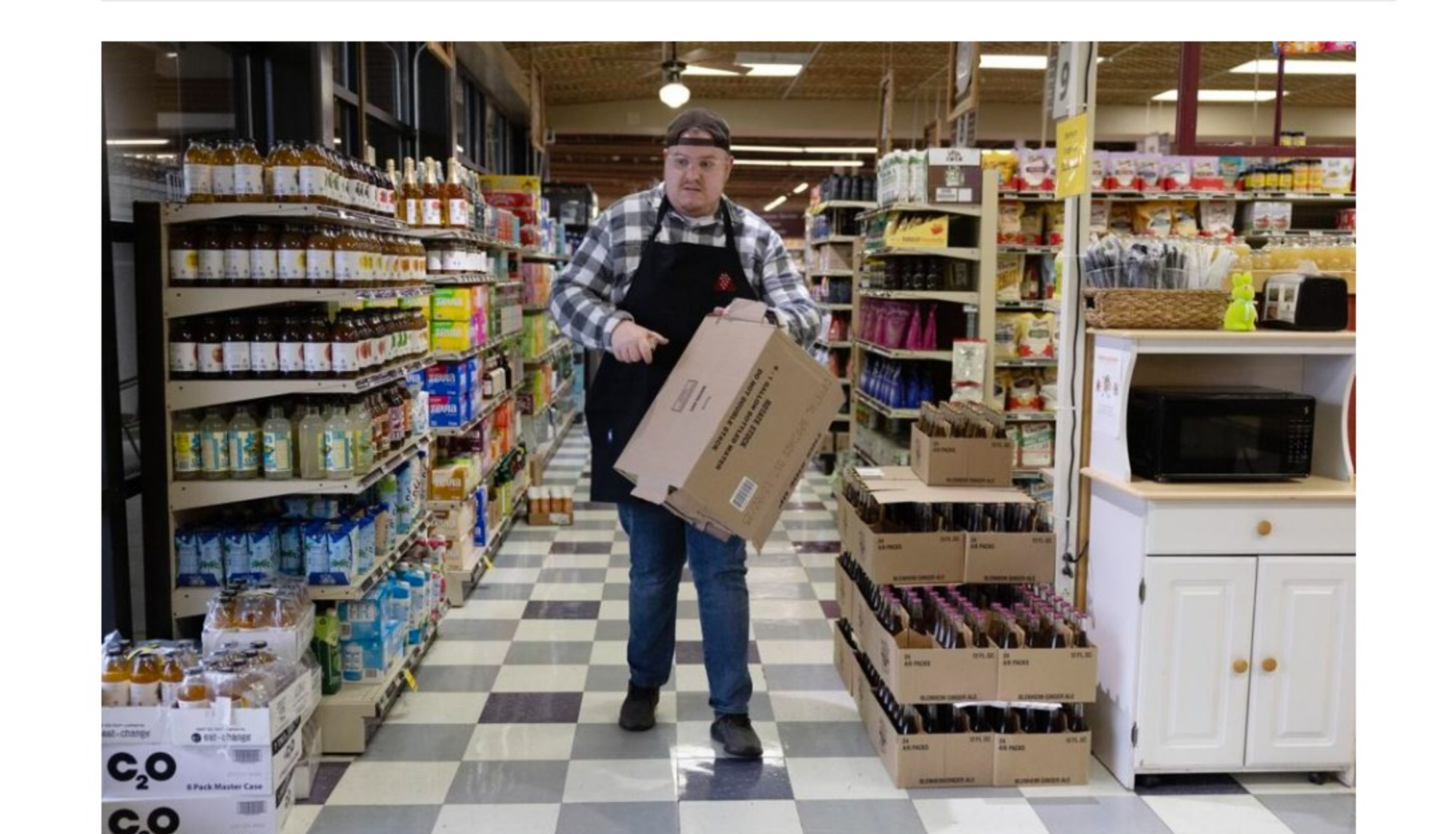
## Striking the right tone

Eric Bailey, 21, is an intern in the first cohort. He said that Good Foods has been a welcoming environment in a way that no other job had been for him.

He previously worked for a major nationwide retail store, but it was clear that they did not have an understanding of how autism affects people.

The developmental disorder can cause roadblocks for soft skills like communication and social interaction. People with autism can also be disproportionately affected by environmental stimuli such as bright lights, background music or sounds from a machine, which overloads the senses.

Bailey was immediately thrust into full eight hour shifts several days per week without much direction or guidance. He said the goals were "unrealistic" and that the store was churning through employees.



Eric Bailey carries a box at Good Foods Grocery on Feb. 23. "I'm getting from this program what I didn't get before ... they really take the time to be genuine, and it feels like I'm in good hands," he said. Margo Wagner, TIMES-DISPATCH

"It's not exactly what they teach but how it's being taught," Bailey said. "I'm getting from this program what I didn't get before ... they really take the time to be genuine, and it feels like I'm in good hands. I finally feel like I'm in a comfortable position."

Bailey said he felt intimidated on his first day, overthinking that the job might be too hard. But after a couple of rounds stocking the shelves, he became self-sufficient and ready to move on to other roles around the store.

The work prep program is led by Sarah McCaig, Commonwealth Autism's manager of workforce development.

The biggest thing, she said, is teaching interns how to cope, navigate situations or problem-solve when issues come up.

"A lot of those small things we take for granted as a neurotypical society," McCaig said. "They're not so small for the autistic population and can interfere with the workday if you don't see that it's happening."

"It's also teaching about the fun side of work, how to be part of the community. It's not only about someone standing over you making sure you're doing everything right."

Much of that work, she said, happens incrementally, building one skill at a time before leaving interns on their own to handle tasks completely autonomously. Then three months later, they will have the foundation needed to go out into the world and work either part, or full-time jobs.

"The understanding of autism in general is still relatively new," Hart said. "Neurodiversity is often not understood but that is something that we should make mainstream. That awareness helps both [people with autism and employers.]"

## From the Archives: Sharp's Island in the James River and its residents



In March 1963, the rolling waters of the James River surrounded a dwelling on Sharp's Island near the 14th Street bridge. While the rain-swollen river didn't crest as high as originally feared, it did reach more than 4 feet above flood stage at Westham and about 5 feet above flood stage at the City Locks. Staff photo