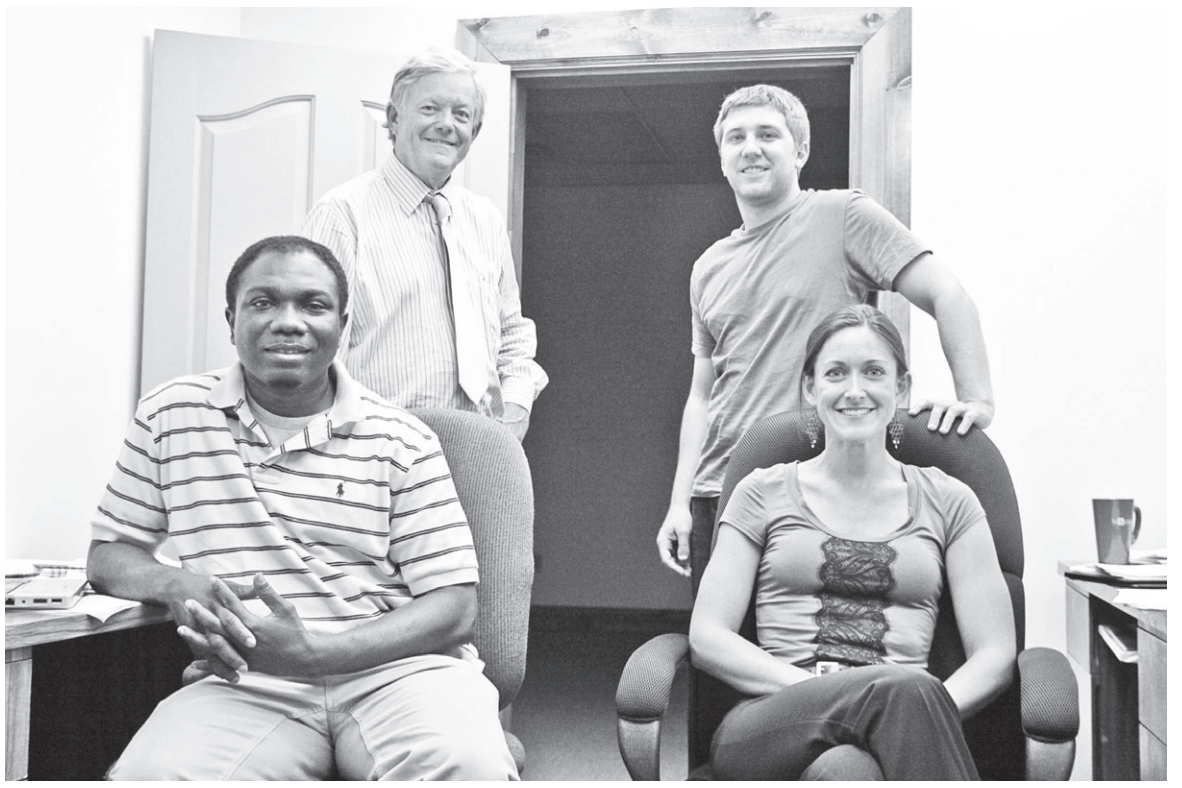

Legal eagles: (l-r) Charles Afeku, Luke Danielson, Dominic Gambino and Kristi Disney are part of the SDSG team that is working to make an impact in resource development on a global scale.

Photo by Matt Smith

Small operation strives for big impact

Local legal team sets sights on worldwide resource development

Matt Smith
Times Staff Writer

As the mining industry attempts to clean up its act on a global scale, a group of ambitious legal eagles are leading the charge from their modest headquarters located in downtown Gunnison.

The Sustainable Development Strategies Group (SDSG) is the brainchild of local attorney Luke Danielson. Before moving his practice to Gunnison in 2002, he spent years working on mining related projects all over the world.

"Just as we were beginning to get a much better handle on how the industry operated … the industry started exploding abroad," said Danielson. "I got bit by the international bug."

After earning a Fulbright Scholarship, Danielson spent time teaching environmental law at the University of Chile and moonlighted as a consultant to the Chilean Mines Ministry. On his next project, with the International Development Research Center in Canada, he helped coordinate studies in 23 Latin American nations that have active mining sites.

All the years of acquired knowledge led to a tipping point. That's when Danielson decided there was room for another party at the table when it came to pursuing sustainable natural resource development.

For the past few weeks, five members of the SDSG team have spent countless hours working from their computers in an upstairs office on Main Street in Gunnison. Among their projects is creating a Model Mining Development Agreement (MMDA) that would set a protocol for the industry to adhere to in countries all over the world.

"If you've lived with mining or seen its effects, you can't forget the images of devastation that it leaves behind," said Charles Afeku, a lawyer from Ghana who is working with the SDSG. "I've also seen the benefits that it can bring. The challenge is to think about what you can do to minimize the problems and augment the values."

One piece of the MMDA is incorporating a "social license" to operate. Under the license's stipulations, each developer would be held responsible for where revenues end up and how the land and its people are treated in the process.

> **‘The challenge is to think about what you can do to minimize the problems and augment the values.’**
>
> **Charles Afeku**

The concept has already gained traction with government entities and non-profit organizations worldwide. The team's latest undertaking is piecing together a case specific development plan for the country of Ecuador.

"All we need is an Internet connection and we're set," said Kristi Disney, a graduate student at the University of Denver (DU), who is interning with the SDSG this summer. "I never thought I'd be able to work on this type of international law from Gunnison, but it's an amazing opportunity that brings a lot to the area."

Both Afeku and Disney found out about the SDSG while taking one of Danielson's courses at DU. His intensive three course series, entitled "Sustainable Development of Natural Resources," is a major piece to SDSG's progress.

In taking a closer look at how past development has occurred, his students learn about social and political factors — such as impacts made to local language and culture, effects on gender relationships, inequalities in the distribution of income and loss of subsistence resources.

"Ultimately, the successful natural resource project of the future is one that meets international expectations, clearly benefits the nation and which is good for the communities around it," said Danielson. "That's a tall order given the way we've done things in the past, but that's where we plan to go."

He went on to explain that the SDSG could make important contributions to the local economy. By putting Gunnison at the center of a hot international topic, Danielson feels that could be a drawing point for experts worldwide.

"My vision of this is, in five or six years we'll have what amounts to a small, little non-profit business that's employing some people and creating some economic spin-off," said Danielson. "Getting a group of experts to come to Crested Butte in August to go to a little conference might not be so hard."

For more information about the SDSG and its current projects and staff, visit sdsg.org.

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