

## THE DEFENDERS

Eugene environmental law advocates move to historic home

*The ELAW team, which backs up lawyers in environmental lawsuits globally, is celebrating its 25th year by moving from its former digs into a historic building that formerly housed Barnhart Real Estate.*

By Diane Dietz  
The Register-Guard



**T**he Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide, better known as ELAW, is turning 25, buying its own \$1 million headquarters and moving uptown to an historic house on Pearl Street.

And some Eugene residents are saying E-what?

Neighbors lounging on the Vero Espresso House veranda or motoring along Pearl on their way south have gotten curious, said Bern Johnson, ELAW executive director.

“We’ve already had people stopping in saying, ‘We’ve seen your sign; tell me about ELAW,’” he said.

ELAW is a nonprofit organization that networks (digitally and personally) 300 lawyers in 70 countries to share legal strategies, scientific research and much more in the service of the environment.

In its first quarter-century — in rented buildings between Franklin Boulevard and the railroad tracks — ELAW helped a Papua New Guinea lawyer stop destructive gold mining, helped an Ecuadorian attorney prevent oil spills in the Amazon, and helped a Jamaican attorney critique a draft fisheries law in order to protect biodiversity. In the past month, ELAW-affiliated attorneys have been quoted in *The New York Times* on tiger preservation in India, on the BBC about a successful challenge of a coal mine in Australia, and in *Business Day* about contamination caused by mining in South Africa.

“Sometimes our work is better known in Jakarta or Mexico City or New Delhi than it is in Eugene,” Johnson said.

ELAW’s work is behind the scenes — back-up for attorneys around the globe — and not something that often makes the news in Eugene or even Oregon.

“Every project,” Johnson said, “we’re trying to help our partners win — protect an ecosystem or challenge an environmental abuse — and we’re trying to help them gain more skills to be more effective in the future.”

ELAW began when attorneys from 10 countries attending a University of Oregon public interest law conference realized they could help each other.

Organizers recruited Johnson, a Harvard-trained attorney, from a Seattle firm. “I took a huge pay cut and moved to Eugene to work for ELAW. It was a great decision,” he said last week.

Over 25 years, the organization has grown to 15 employees, including four attorneys and three scientists who specialize in biochemistry, marine ecology and geography.

ELAW’s budget last year was \$1.6 million, and the donor-funded agency consistently receives high marks from Charity Navigator for its accountability and financial management.

The agency is funded by donations: large, multi-year grants from foundations, mainly, but also private contributions, according to ELAW’s annual report.

Johnson’s salary was \$116,000 in 2014, according to IRS records.

Johnson said buying a permanent home for ELAW will help ensure its growth into the future. Its services have increased in importance, he said.

“The climate crisis really illustrates that we share one planet, one climate, and we all have to take better care of it,” he said. “As trade becomes more global, it’s more important that there’s an effective global environmental movement.”

ELAW bought the Pearl Street house in June for about \$1 million, Johnson said. In the next couple of months, the agency will launch a capital campaign to pay off the mortgage, he said. The mortgage is for \$600,000, according to records with Lane County.

The craftsman-style house was built around 1915 as a duplex for members of the related Westfall and Soult families, who were connected with the Soult McDonald Lumber Co. and Eugene Sand & Gravel, according to historical accounts.

For the past two decades, Barnhart Associates real estate was located at the house. “It’s the coolest building in Eugene,” said the now-55-year-old Johnson.

Something interesting for Vero coffee drinkers to watch out for: ELAW hosts attorneys from around the globe, who come to Eugene regularly to study English, improve their skills by sitting in on a law class, or even to witness how waste management is handled in a developed city.

The visitors enjoyed ELAW’s old digs, and are sure to appreciate the new ones, Johnson said.

“It’s so accessible and clean and calm compared to a lot of the capital cities around the world where our partners come from,” he said. “They really enjoy coming here and being part of the Eugene community.”