

## Cohousing Comes to Ridgway

# It Takes a Village

**O**n a sweaty-hot morning in early May, a small band of friends gather with rakes, shovels, garbage bags and weed-whackers on the vacant lot in downtown Ridgway that they plan to develop into Ridgway's first cohousing community over the next few years.

It's time to do a little spring cleanup on the land. There is a feeling of collective giddiness in the air, as if they are a bunch of schoolkids suddenly sprung from class for community service day.

Geoff Tischbein, a retired Division of Wildlife public information officer, prowls the perimeter of the property, giving the weeds a haircut.

Nearby, Mick and Kathy Graff, in matching sunhats and work gloves, are on litter patrol. They relocated from Cincinnati to Ouray County in 2001 after Mick retired from a 34-year career as a patent attorney with Procter & Gamble. Today they



live near Black Lake, a scenic rural area between Ridgway and Ouray.

"We've been there 18 years, and we're ready to downsize," says Kathy, who has a Masters of Divinity from Cornell University, over the buzz of Tischbein's weedeater. "We love our house. But we are going to love this too. And the people."

Over by Highway 62, as traffic rumbles by, Sally Swartz is sitting on the ground beneath a large sign that says "Future

Home of Alpenglow Cohousing", stuffing stray twigs and dead leaves into a black plastic garbage bag.

Sally and her husband Don, a dentist, "are ready to scale down too," she says. Their 10-acre spread up on Log Hill Mesa is getting to be more than they can manage.

The Swartzes were first exposed to the idea of cohousing when their son, an architect, was in grad school and had an assignment to design a cohousing neighborhood. At the time they never imagined they'd become so deeply involved in creating a cohousing community of their own.

"We are excited about how this has evolved," Sally smiles. "You get to be this age, and if you don't risk something, what have you missed in life? You know, should we just sit at home eating Fruit Loops, and live and die?"

She stuffs another handful of dead leaves into the garbage bag as if to say: "I don't think so."

The Alpenglow Cohousing community will be located on 4.5 acres of vacant land right in the heart of downtown Ridgway. The parcel used to be a railroad yard for the Rio Grande Southern until it was decommissioned in the 1950s, and has been dormant ever since. (Photo by Samantha Tisdal Wright)



Members of Alpenglow Cohousing gathered with their architects at the project site in early May. From left: Kate Kellogg, Kit Meckel, Geoff Tischbein, Don Swartz, Mick Groff, John Baskfield, Kathy Graff, Sally Swartz. (Photo by Samantha Tisdal Wright)

BY SAMANTHA TISDEL WRIGHT

## DECIDEDLY UN-HIPPIE-ISH

"It's not a hippie commune."

That's the first thing the founding members of Alpenglow Cohousing (there are 10 of them in all) will tell you when they describe the intentional neighborhood they are working to develop on this 4.5-acre parcel of vacant land in the heart of downtown Ridgway.

These folks are many things — fit, adventurous, well traveled, well educated, and infused with a passion for politics, culture, the great outdoors, the Broncos, and the craft beer at the Colorado Boy Brewery. They are, in fact, your classic mature Ridgway-ites, deeply vested in their community — and decidedly un-hippie-ish.

They got to know each other at the United Church of the San Juans, a progressive church in Ridgway. One morning after Sunday services in the winter of 2016, while standing around drinking coffee, they got to talking about their various living situations.

Some had been widowed, or divorced, and were seeking a new way to live that helped them feel more connected. Others had built large dream-homes in remote parts of the county, and knew it would soon be time to simplify and downsize. Most were retired or semi-retired. None could bear the thought of having to move away from Ridgway as they grew older.

So they came up with a plan to buy some land in the heart of the town they loved, and build a multigenerational neighborhood there, comprised of homes that would be privately owned, connected by shared amenities such as a common house (think "community living room") and a common vision for collective living.

They wrote their vision statement down. It goes like this:



*We are creating an intentional neighborhood where we will live simply, care for one another, and share resources. We will focus on peacefulness and kindness as we reside in small, beautiful, environmentally friendly homes that surround our common house.*

Then they drafted a "living document" outlining how they would work together to make it happen — a simple list of interpersonal agreements that would guide their interactions going forward, such as a commitment to nonviolent communication and decision-making by consensus.

They christened their idea Alpenglow Cohousing.

## AN IDEA AS OLD AS HUMANITY

They had their concept, and they had a name for their concept, but they didn't have a clue yet about how to go about achieving it. So they did a lot of reading,

and started visiting established cohousing communities around Colorado to see how they work. (The closest, Heartwood, is just a few hours away near Durango.)

They also reached out to Katie McCamant, the woman who literally wrote the book on cohousing. In fact, McCamant has coauthored *two* books on the subject along with her husband, Charles Durrett: *Creating Cohousing, Building Sustainable Communities* (New Society Publishers, 2011) and *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* (Ten Speed Press, 1994). Together, McCamant and Durrett have designed and developed over 50 cohousing communities in the United States and consulted on many more around the world.

McCamant accepted Alpenglow's invitation to come to Ridgway for five days in early 2017. Cohousing, she explained at the public presentation she gave at the Sherbino Theater, is nothing new.

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## WHAT IS COHOUSING?

Cohousing is an intentional community of private homes clustered around shared space. Each attached or single family home has traditional amenities, including a private kitchen. Shared spaces typically feature a common house, which may include a large kitchen and din-

ing area, laundry, and recreational spaces. Shared outdoor space may include parking, walkways, open space, and gardens. Neighbors also share resources like tools and lawnmowers.

Households have independent incomes and private lives, but neighbors collaboratively plan and manage community activities and shared spaces.

The legal structure is typically an HOA, Condominium Association, or Housing Cooperative. Community activities feature regularly scheduled shared meals, meetings, and workdays. Neighbors gather for parties, games, movies, or other events. Cohousing makes it easy to form clubs, organize child and elder care, and carpool.

Its roots can be found in traditional rural villages around the world.

Modern cohousing communities are intentional, collaborative neighborhoods that combine extensive common facilities with private homes to create strong and successful housing developments.

McCamant and her husband may have been first to coin the term “cohousing” after discovering the model while traveling in Europe in the 1980s. They came back to the U.S. to pioneer one of this country’s first cohousing communities in California in the late 1980s, and helped jumpstart the first wave of cohousing developments that spread across the U.S. shortly thereafter.

Most of these communities are organized as townhouse or condominium developments with a homeowners association; a few are organized as cooperatives. Cohousing is not a financial or legal model, but rather a descriptive term that shows the intent of these developments to cultivate a strong sense of community through extensive common facilities and active collaboration between its residents.

Proponents say cohousing can foster cooperation and a sense of belonging, use resources more efficiently and make everything from gardening to childcare to

socializing simpler and more enjoyable.

“The intention is for communities to come together and share resources rather than pulling into your garage and closing the doors and never knowing your neighbors,” says Shawn Mulligan, who lives at Stone Curves in Tucson, a community that recently celebrated its tenth anniversary.

Cohousing is definitely enjoying a new moment in the United States, with hundreds of new intentional communities springing up across the country, joining many others that are already mature and well established. Ten new cohousing projects, including Alpenglow, are currently in the works just in Colorado.

“The community aspect is attractive to most of us,” says Tischbein. “We are wanting to be together. As a species most of us have the desire to help other people and there are times some of us will need help. This will provide an instantaneous community so we can help each other, and get help when we need it. There’s that sense of being there for each other.”

#### LAY OF THE LAND

As they started their journey toward cohousing, the Alpenglow founders embraced the philosophy that form follows function. “The function is to create

a community of people that nourish and care for one another,” Tischbein explained. “Now we are working on the form.”

The form, in turn, started with the land: 4.5 acres right in the heart of downtown Ridgway, between Cimarron Books & Coffee and the Adobe Inn. The parcel used to be a railroad yard for the Rio Grande Southern until it was decommissioned in the 1950s, and has been dormant ever since.

It’s a rambling, gently sloping rectangular lot, bracketed by Highway 62/Sherman Street on its north end and by Cottonwood Creek to the south, and bisected along its entire length by the historic abandoned railroad grade, with glimpses of the Cimarrons and gorgeous up-valley views of Mt. Abram and White House Peak.

The property is within walking or cycling distance of just about everything that everyone adores about Ridgway: the Uncompahgre Riverway Trail, Hartwell Park and Rollans Park; the public schools and library; the playing fields at Solar Ranch; and, of course, Ridgway’s legendary eateries, breweries, shops and coffee joints. As an added bonus, Mountain Medical Center, Proximity Space (a top-notch coworking facility with high-speed internet) and the Second Chance Thrift Store are right across the street.

#### COMMUNITY PROFILE: HEARTWOOD COHOUSING

A few mountain passes to the south of Ridgway, Heartwood Cohousing has been ticking away for 20 years now, and offers a glimpse into a thriving, well-established cohousing community.

Heartwood is a 24-home rural community near Durango made up of people of all ages and from all walks of life. Some members have been there since the beginning, and others have recently arrived.

They take care of their own water, sewer, roads and trash. In addition to their beautiful common house, they have shared gardens, several greenhouses, a workshop, a meditation yurt, a tennis court, a hot tub, and more. The interior spaces of the community are connected by pedestrian pathways, and residents enjoy meals together three times a week.

Heartwood founder Sandy Thomson



and her husband traveled in southeast Asia and Latin America for five years as a young couple, and realized they wanted to live in a village-like atmosphere when they came home to start a family — someplace compact and multigenerational, where the kids were safe and it was hard to tell whose kids were whose. Where people were at ease with each other, trusted one another, and were surrounded by natural beauty.

They explored a lot of small towns when they returned to the U.S. and didn’t find

anyplace that clicked. Then they came across the cohousing concept and found that it fit really well with what they were seeking. So, like the founders of Alpenglow, they rolled up their sleeves with a group of like-minded people and charged ahead to turn their vision into a reality.

They worked for three years to find land they could develop. Eventually, they found it: 361 acres of meadow, pine forest, and pasture near Bayfield, Colo. about 15 minutes from Durango.

“The county process was a huge obstacle,” Thomson said. “They say they like cluster developments, but in reality, their regulations are not set up for it, so we were a square peg in a round hole. We are fairly rural, and they are not used to having houses close together in a rural setting.”

It took time to get the variances they needed. Then they met with opposition from their prospective neighbors in

They are, in fact, your classic mature Ridgway-ites, deeply vested in their community — and decidedly un-hippie-ish.

## AN IDEAL FIT

Together, the Alpenglow founders pooled together \$1.2 million to buy the parcel, and then approached the local architecture firm Conterra Workshop with their cohousing vision. They explained that they wanted a tight sense of community, and that they loved the idea of a central Ridgway location within walking distance of everything.

Conterra architects John Baskfield and Kit Meckel eagerly accepted the assignment to design Ridgway's first cohousing community.

"From an architectural standpoint, it's a really special project," Baskfield said. "As architects, we always ask ourselves, how can we be citizens who make the community better through design? Cohousing, by its very nature, strives to do that. We felt really lucky to be chosen for this project."

The design process thus far has been both rewarding and challenging. "It's a strange piece of land," Meckel said. "It's long and skinny. The town grid doesn't currently come into it. And it has a lot going on — wetlands, Cottonwood Creek, Highway 62/ Sherman Street, as well as County Road 23 in the back."

Multiple projects have tried unsuccessfully to do something with the property

over the years. But Meckel and Baskfield think the cohousing project just might be the perfect fit.

"The ideas they are trying to pull off are ideas we are trying to pull off all the time — energy efficiency, sustainability, putting the land to its highest and best use," Baskfield said. "It's a way to really get some density into Ridgway, through a development where community is the big idea."

Current design plans call for Alpenglow to have 24 units at full buildout. They will be on the smaller side, ranging from 900 square feet to 1500 square feet. (Cohousing developments generally eschew large, lavish, private dwellings as a way of encouraging community members to use the common house more frequently.)

The homes, designed as duplexes, will have high ceilings, big windows, and lofts in the upstairs for the larger units, to enhance the feeling of spaciousness even though they are, by intent, fairly compact and close together.

In the cohousing design world, there is actually a formula for determining how close together houses should be. "They say that you want to be somewhere between 20-40 feet from your neighbors, and that's when you start to create connections," Meckel explained. "Whereas if the homes are like 75 feet apart (which is

more typical of traditional suburban subdivisions) you are less likely to talk to your neighbors and develop relationships."

## WALK THIS WAY

The design of the Alpenglow community has also been driven by the owners' desire to be pedestrian-oriented, which has meant relegating parking and garages to either end of the development. The residential units and common house will be placed toward the core of the property, connected by a central plaza and promenade that follows the path of the old railroad grade.

"There will be a bollard system at the south and north ends of the property where the parking areas are," Meckel said. "At that point residents and visitors will have to park and walk in, or drop people off at the common house. It gives a level of access, but it's not a typical street development with a street and alley."

"If we were doing it as a traditional development it would be more challenging," Baskfield added. "But because the parcel is long and narrow, it works well to put the parking on the outside on either end of the core development. If we had to put in multiple driveways, we would be spending so much of the land on hardscaping and

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conservative Bayfield. "They didn't have any idea what this cohousing thing was, and assumed it was a commune," Thomson recalled.

But, she added, 20 years later, "They love us now."

When Heartwood's founders got their development built and finally moved into their homes, they thought the hard part was over. "But we were just starting," Thomson said. "We realized, now we gotta learn to live together."

They did this in a very intentional way, supported by their community's interpersonal agreements, which provide a blueprint for conflict resolution and decision-making. These agreements include commitments from each member of the community "to communicate with integrity, to listen with my heart, to own my feelings, to honor each person's process, to be aware of conflict, to resolve conflicts constructively," and more.

It's been a great place for the Thomsons to raise their family. "My kids, everywhere they go, they get compliments," Thomson said. "They really know how to talk to adults, I think because they grew up in an environment where that was expected of them."

Remarkably, half of the people who were at Heartwood in the beginning are still living there. "We have had a good core group of people here the entire time. There has not been as much turnover as you would think," Thomson said.

And for herself, as an introvert, "It works really well for me," Thomson said. "I can go to a party at the common house for an hour and my husband can stay for the night. It's very spontaneous, and easy to have social interactions if you want them and easy to avoid if you don't. Everyone respects each other."

Thomson's nuts-and-bolts advice for the Alpenglow founders as they embark

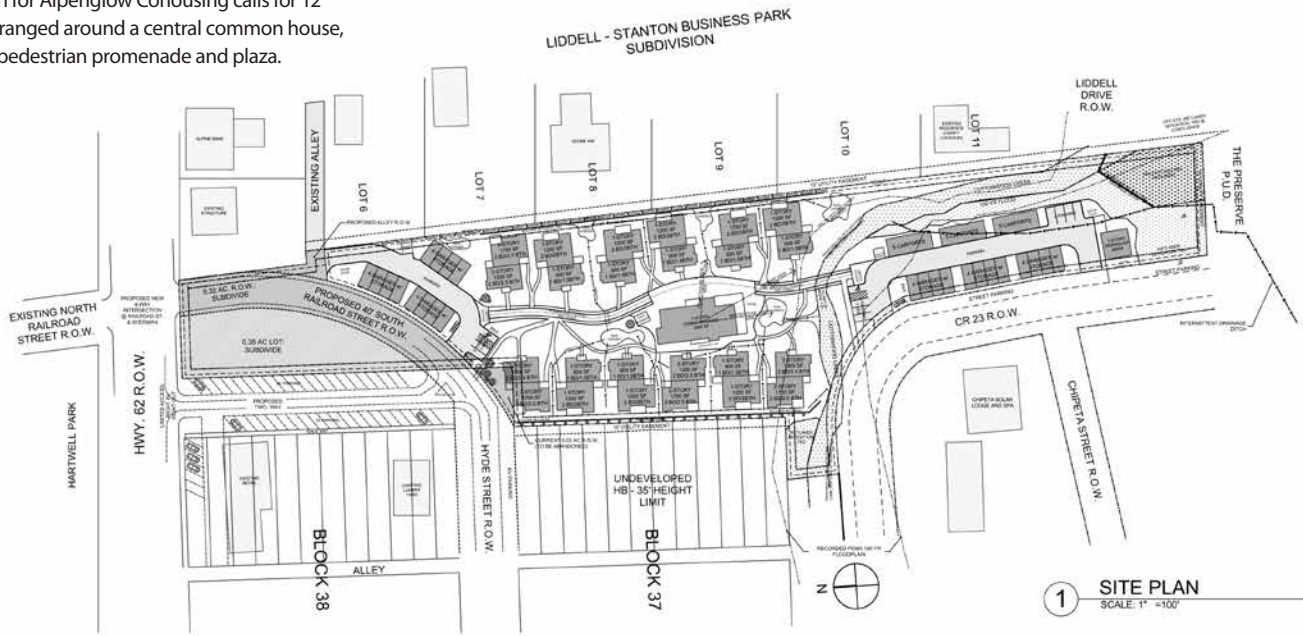
on their own cohousing adventure?

"I would say, porches are a really important part of the design," Thomson said. "We all have really nice front porches that are covered. Everyone knows that if you are sitting on your front porch you are open for visitors. That happens a lot; someone sits out on their porch and before you know it there are two or three folks on the porch and then someone runs in to get a bottle of wine..."

Also, Thomson adds, "It's important to clarify your community's vision and values, and interpersonal agreements from the beginning, so when conflicts do come up you can refer to those agreements. It's really intense to develop a community with a bunch of other people, especially when money is involved. If you can come up with shared values and shared interpersonal agreements, it will go a long way toward creating a climate where you can create a successful community."



The site plan for Alpenglow Cohousing calls for 12 duplexes arranged around a central common house, linked by a pedestrian promenade and plaza.



access that it would be hard to fit in more than a handful of houses.”

Landscaping and gardens in the common areas, designed by Rob Breeden of NVision Design Studio in Fruita, will play a big part in enhancing the feeling of connectedness within the community.

“The play between public and private is tricky,” Meckel said. “The vision is to create private pockets of space behind the houses, while the front of the houses are designed to have visual interaction with the central common area. The kitchens all have a sink that looks out into the plaza. There will always be that visual connection on the front side, and you can filter back and retire toward the back of the house if you want more privacy.”

## HOUSE OF COMMONS

The common house is perhaps the most important design element of the entire Alpenglow project. Once built, it will be the focal point, the gathering place, the collective heartbeat of the neighborhood, and it must encourage

intentional interaction — the secret sauce of any thriving cohousing community.

Baskfield and Meckel did a ton of research, and worked closely with the Alpenglow project owners, to achieve this effect in their common house design.

At its core will be a large, versatile great room with views up-valley toward Mt. Abram and White House peak. This area will be used for dining (most cohousing communities have group dinners several times a week), and will also have a fireplace and cozy lounge area. There will be a large wraparound porch to the south and east, and a community kitchen with a large island, a prep area, and a peninsula where residents can sit and chat with folks who are working in the kitchen.

Beyond the great room, the common house will include a small den, a media room with a TV and stereo (“So we can yell at the Bronco’s together,” Tischbein laughed), a mailroom, an entry/mudroom area, and other flexible spaces that can be used for exercise, meetings, crafts or meditation.

“The idea is to make people feel com-

fortable, kick off their shoes and stay a while,” Meckel said. “We are going to try to keep those spaces very versatile, so that whatever the community needs to do they have a space at the common house to do it.”

The common house will also incorporate a guest suite that anyone in the community can reserve, with a bedroom and an attached bath. “It allows a lot of people who may not feel comfortable buying a small unit to still have a guest room for company,” Baskfield said.

## WON'T YOU BE OUR NEIGHBOR?

They have the property, they have the design, and they have the core group of founders. Now, Alpenglow Cohousing needs more members.

“The rule of thumb is once you have got 70 percent of the total number of households for a cohousing community, you can start construction and that will generate interest to attract more members,” Tischbein said.

That means that, ideally, 18 of the 24

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED IN ALPENGLOW COHOUSING

**W**ant to learn more about Alpenglow Cohousing? The first step of engagement is to connect with one of Alpenglow’s members as a “buddy.” You can come to meetings, get to know other members and join in community gatherings.

Ready to explore further? After you have attended some meetings and it feels right to become more involved, you can become an Explorer. Explorers come to regular meetings, join up with a committee and make small monthly financial contributions towards an “organizational fee.” If you decide to move forward, your contributions will eventually go towards reserving your spot in line for a home.

When you are ready to be a member and reserve a home, you make an investment in the project and secure your place in line for home selection. Once you have made this commitment, you are considered an Alpenglow Cohousing Member with full rights and privileges.

Learn more at:  
[alpenglowcohousing.org](http://alpenglowcohousing.org).

"We are looking for people that have open minds, have an idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts."

planned Alpenglow units must be reserved before the project can launch into full-scale development. (Currently six units are spoken for.)

"We are looking for people that have open minds, have an idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts," Tischbein said. "We want to be inclusive."

The Alpenglow folks are working to get the word out to prospective new members through multiple channels, from the hyper-local to the national. They have ads on Colorado Public Radio and in national cohousing magazines. They'll have booths at the Ridgway Farmer's Market and Summer Concert Series. They're on Facebook. And they're building relationships with local realtors.

In a community like Ridgway, in the throes of a new real estate boom and with rising property values and construction costs, affordability has also been a challenge.

"We were hoping to be able to build 950-square-foot homes for \$250,000," Tischbein said. "We are trying to cut the



The main pathway of Nevada City Cohousing, Nevada City, Calif. (Courtesy photo)


costs down. But with construction costs rising in the area, it is now going to be \$300,000 for a 900-square-foot house and over \$400,000 for a 1,200 square-foot house," which is in line with what similar properties are going for in Ridgway and the surrounding area.

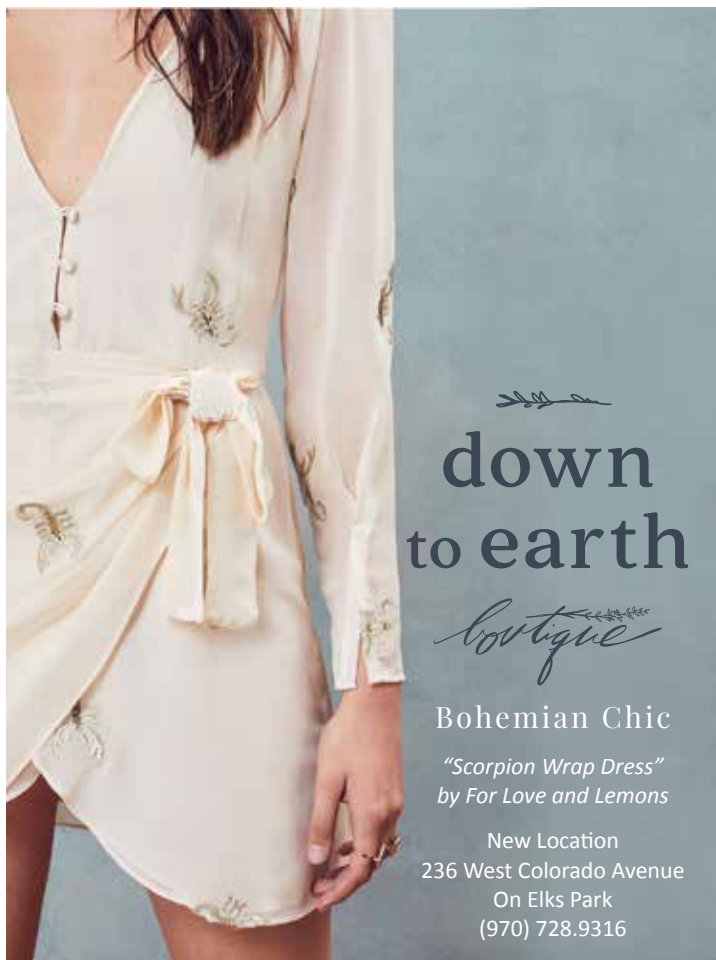
Because they are self-developing, "We are not making a profit," Tischbein stressed. "These are the costs of the actual building." And for that amount of money,

he added, "members are buying more than just a house. They are also buying use of the whole property. And the use of the common house."

While the core group of owners are all of retirement age, they don't see Alpenglow as purely a retirement community. Indeed, they hope that as their community coalesces, it will become more multigenerational, with a diverse array of community members in all stages of life — one reason they are working so hard to make the homes affordable.

So, there are still some things that need to come together to transform Alpenglow Cohousing from a dream to a reality.

In the meantime, Baskfield said, "We applaud the courage of this group of regular citizens to step up and say, 'We are going to try to do this thing that is really a hard thing to do, take the risk, risk our own savings, volunteer countless hours and make this thing work.' That has been inspiring, to see these folks who are not developers have the courage and tenacity to do that." 

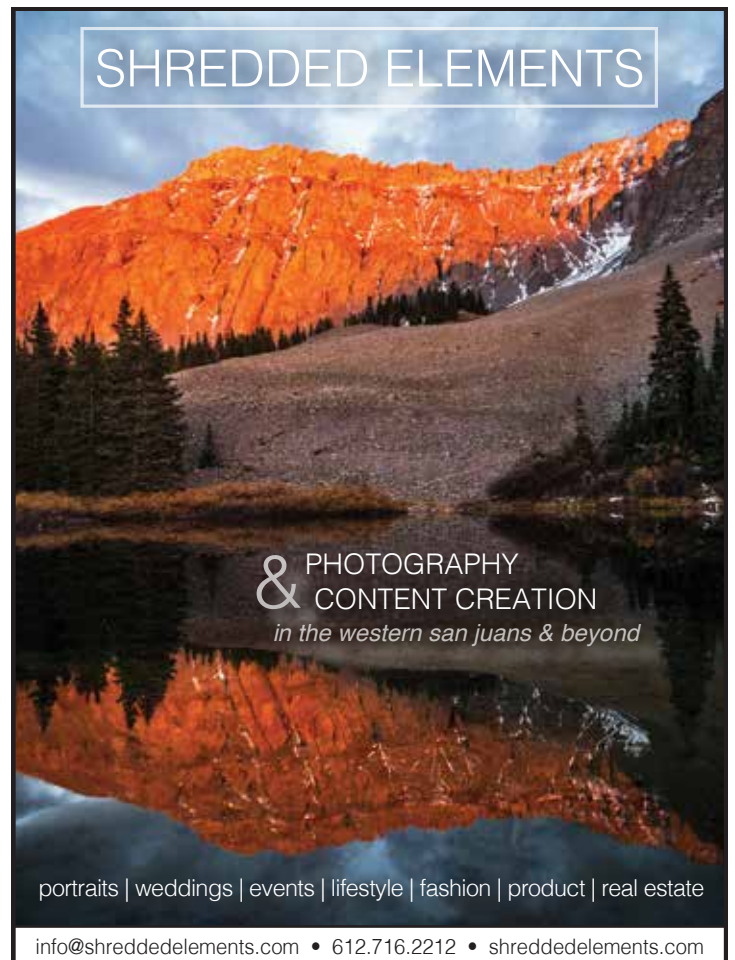


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