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## A 'panel' discussion

By: GARY PULEO , Times Herald Staff

COLLEGEVILLE - A father and daughter are teaming up to shed some light on a city that is a world away.

As the founder and president of SunPower Builders, John Costanza has been harnessing solar energy into the homes he builds for three decades.

Now his ambitious daughter, 24-year-old Kira, has embarked on her own separate venture, SunPower Afrique, that operates in tandem with her dad, who lends his expertise as a solar consultant.

A trip to West Africa last spring proved to be a fortuitous journey for the younger Costanza, who had been working for the United Nations in New York.

"I had arrived for a four-month long fellowship working in microfinance in Togo, West Africa," Kira Costanza recalled. "After spending two years in the UN community, I was thrilled to find an opportunity to experience the realities of international development on the ground." She quickly found a place in the tiny West African country of 6.5 million people as a volunteer with a microfinance institution called FECECAV.

"Microfinance companies are banks that give tiny loans, usually less than \$500, to people who are in poverty and want to start a business," Costanza explained. "Since its inception in Togo 15 years ago, microfinance has stimulated significant development in local economies." The biggest obstacle to their productivity is a lack of reliable electricity, she said.

"After nearly daily power outages, countless manpower hours lost and some branches completely void of any power source, it became obvious that microfinance's progression in Togo was constrained. Achieving operational self-sufficiency is elusive with such inefficiency and limitations."

Because of her background, being raised in a solar-powered home in Collegeville, Costanza intuitively knew she could provide the solution.

"After nearly 40 pages of blog entries, quiet conversations and inspired scribbling, I came to the realization that connecting FECECAV to solar energy could be the beginnings of sustainability for Togo's microfinance sector," she noted.

"I met with Togo's National Microfinance Community, wrote a mission statement and filed for nonprofit status."

On the advice of his daughter, John Costanza traveled to Togo to personally investigate the possibilities of solar energy for the banks.

Before long, the fundamental mission of SunPower Afrique was gaining ground.

"The reason this will work is that he is lending his expertise to the project; designing the system, providing training for local mechanics, electricians and others to install and maintain these solar systems that we install," Kira Costanza said.

She is now applying for grants and fellowships in an effort to mobilize the essential fundraising for the pilot installations at FECECAV and to create jobs for the future expansion of a solar industry in Togo.

"This project is about both solar and microfinance," Costanza said, "because I see them working in tandem, and both being sustainable in innovative ways to combat poverty."

For more information, visit [www.sunpowerafrique.org](http://www.sunpowerafrique.org).

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