



KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

Fonkoze website offers way to assist rebuilding of troubled Caribbean nation

The World Wide Web has been a boon for commerce, education and entertainment. It has made it possible to shop, conduct research, watch videos, play games and more — without having to get up from your favorite chair.

The Web also has made it possible to extend a hand around the world and offer help to those in need, no matter where they may be. Whether it's a natural disaster, armed conflict or crippling poverty causing the suffering, there's sure to be a website offering assistance to the victims.

Fonkoze.org is a site dedicated to helping our impoverished neighbors in Haiti. This Caribbean nation should be a thriving tropical paradise, but centuries of foreign occupation, revolution, corruption and natural disasters have left it a broken mess.

Over the edge

Two years ago this week, a massive earthquake pushed an already teetering Haiti over the edge. While the actual death toll may never be known, it was well into the tens of thousands. Many more were injured and more than a million people were left homeless. Much of the nation's infrastructure, including many government buildings, was destroyed.

Despite billions of dollars in international aid that poured in after the quake, much work still needs to be done to alleviate the suffering. Fonkoze's mission is to provide the

economic assistance needed for Haitians to dig themselves out of the literal and figurative rubble they've been buried under. The website is topped with the phrase "Building the Economic Foundations for Democracy in Haiti."

Fonkoze, which is an acronym for a Creole phrase meaning Shoulder-to-Shoulder Foundation, bills itself as Haiti's leading microfinance institution. It provides small loans, starting at \$25, to clients to help them acquire the assets and savings they need to become self-sufficient. Simple things, like goats, chickens or merchandise to sell, can start a family on the path out of poverty.

More than money

Education is provided, in addition to the loans, to teach the clients how to manage their finances and build credit. The educational outreach also includes other life skills such as health care and literacy.

Women make up the vast majority of Fonkoze's clients. Women, especially single mothers, have been the hardest hit by the extreme poverty. Fonkoze's premise is that by empowering these women with education and financial assistance, they're sowing the seeds for healthy growth in the community.

The website appears to serve two basic functions. The first is to educate visitors about Haiti's plight and what Fonkoze is doing to help. The second, and more important function, is to be a conduit for donations from those who wish to help. The site features several ways to donate money, including instant

donations, monthly pledges and direct money transfers to individuals or organizations through one of their 46 bank branches in Haiti.

Positive presentation

The website's color palette and imagery give it an upbeat, tropical look. Despite all the nation's suffering, the site is full of pictures of smiling, confident-looking people. The home page, while a bit busy, is organized with intuitive navigation.

A slideshow at the top of the page transitions between featured stories on the site, such as, the anniversary of the quake, an annual report, and some of the organization's programs for the poor. Clicking on any of the slides takes you to an inside page on the topic. The pages are all visually unified and feature easy navigation to all other areas on the site.

Although many of the pages are text heavy, there are plenty of photos, videos and graphics to keep things visually stimulating. The photos feature clients and staff members in Haiti, and the videos show case studies of some of the program's success stories.

Fonkoze is a well-done site with a clear mission. It seems logical that teaching people how to help themselves, and giving them the tools to do so, is a better long-term strategy for success than just throwing money at them. Of course, there are many people who need help locally, but in a country as damaged as Haiti, a little money can go a long way.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.



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