

# Websites a window to home for islanders

**A growing number of websites connecting Caribbean immigrants to their homelands are flourishing in South Florida.**

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The websites have names that are unique to their Caribbean heritage: [afiwi.com](http://afiwi.com) -- Jamaican patois for "It's for all of us" -- or [sakapfet.com](http://sakapfet.com) and [whata-gwan.com](http://whata-gwan.com) -- the Haitian creole and Jamaican patois phrases for "What's going on?"

Brisk updates of political upheaval in Haiti share space with details of the Haitian Independence Festival. A surge in crime in the Jamaican parish of St. James runs next to a headline on the war of words between rival dancehall stars Beenie Man and Bounty Killer. A colorful wall of fliers online details upcoming parties here and on the islands for the jet-setting crowd -- including those gearing up for the carnival in Trinidad that starts Feb. 16.

For the 465,000-plus immigrants of Caribbean ancestry who call South Florida home, the websites serve as a vital connection to the islands -- from lists of alumni associations to chatrooms.

Among the younger generation of Caribbean-American immigrants, the sites also have slowly usurped traditional Caribbean weekly newspapers as the primary source of information about the region.

No matter how varied their content or in what language, the sites have a common goal, said Brad 'Tafa' Hemmings of [afiwi.com](http://afiwi.com): "to achieve a sense of community."

Hemmings created the site in 2001 with friend Kevin "Ital-K" Smith, a radio personality on WLRN 91.3 FM's *Sounds of the Caribbean*.

Since [afiwi.com](http://afiwi.com) started, dozens of other sites have appeared. Some target the entire region or just one island; others focus on niche markets like the lucrative party scene.

"Everybody wants to know what parties to check out when they go home to the islands or where to party when they visit from the islands," said Dwight

Yearwood, a Pembroke Pines resident of Jamaican and Barbadian heritage and co-creator of whata-gwan.com.

Ryan Alexander, a member of the Caribbean Student Association at Florida International University, says surfing these sites are a daily ritual for many students.

"I use the sites mainly to see pictures that may have been taken at parties and events," said Alexander, a Trinidad national majoring in marketing and public relations. "The websites help provide exposure for a lot of student events, for charity work and, of course, for parties. There are so many now, and I think it shows a growing interest in the Caribbean."

The sites really don't compete, Hemmings says. "I think we all have our place. We all see each other or know each other from working together on other sites before creating our own."

## **IDENTITY FEARS**

For too long, website creators said, island immigrants identified closely with their birth islands out of fear they'd lose their identity.

"Back in the day it was, 'I'm Jamaican and you're a Trini,' and we did our own thing," Smith said. "But the reality is, what happens on one island will inevitably have a ripple effect on another island."

For Hemmings, the site also bridged a gap with which many within the diaspora struggle: what to do when you're of mixed Caribbean heritage and unsure which identity to celebrate.

Hemmings, born to a Trinidadian mother and a Jamaican father, also speaks Haitian Creole and has lived in the Bahamas and Cayman Islands. The company shirt has a logo that bears this nod to his heritage: Trini-maican.

"The site has definitely helped break down some of the barriers we had in our own communities," he said.

Immigrants yearned for a sense of identity even after creating new lives abroad, said Carol Boyce Davies, a professor of African and New World Studies and English at Florida International University.

Websites are the new frontier, supplanting traditional weekly newspapers because the younger generation wants to -- and has been able to -- readily create virtual communities to maintain identities, Boyce Davies said.

"When older folks left the islands, they often left for good, with rarely any plans to return unless it was to retire, because it was a big struggle to save money and go home," she said.

Cheaper airline tickets have made trips home for this generation more frequent, and the Internet has helped them maintain the connection to family and friends, said Boyce Davies.

The websites also have become a tutorial for a younger generation of American citizens weaned from their parents' rich dialect.

## **DEEP LOVE**

"There is a deep sense of love for where their parents are coming from," said Boyce Davies.

It is that deep love that Mia Lopez and her cousins Michael Emeran and Guy-Charles Emeran had for their parents' native Haiti that spawned the website [sakapfet.com](http://sakapfet.com).

"We were up at 3 o'clock one morning, toying with the computer, when we had this idea to create a family website," Lopez said.

"Sak passe [What's up?] was taken, so sakapfet it was," she said.

"We started just showing photos of the island, of the beaches and the mountains and waterfalls, and people would visit and say, 'We don't know this side of Haiti,' " Lopez said.

Soon 1,200 hits grew to 20,000 to more than 100,000. The photos led to message boards and news and cultural updates.

"We knew we were on to something when we started hearing from Haitians living in Alaska," Lopez said.

Sites like sakapfet.com and others are thriving because they have become a powerful tool for immigrants torn about leaving their country -- whether by choice or by fear of political upheaval, she said.

For Lopez, whose Cuban father met and married her Haitian mother while traveling frequently to Haiti, a website is the closest connection she's been able to have to either island.

"People have a certain pride about their country. For Haiti, no matter how tumultuous it can be, there's a love there that we cannot shake," Lopez said.

"I mean, I was born here, but I always say Haiti is my home, and I'm gonna go back."