

Refugees, Radio and a Compostable Straw  
Reflection by Kathleen Maynard

Sidibé is from Mali. He sells coconut water outside of a park where we have frequently played and run around with our children during our time in mission, before or after work and school. Last week we were leaving the park and came upon Sidibé with his large cooler of coconuts. Our daughter Maëlle enthusiastically suggested we sit and drink some cool coconut water, one of her favorite Brazilian treats. She remembered Sidibé from many other times we've stopped to chat and sip coconut water over the last couple of years.

Last week when Sidibé handed Maëlle a coconut he offered her a compostable straw to drink it with! Wow. I was amazed that this individual, with few resources, working 12 hours per day or more to make ends meet, was sacrificing some of his precious profit in order to help protect our environment! Imagine if all businesses and corporations and people practiced the same consciousness and generosity as Sidibé.

According to The NY Times and other major news agencies, eight million tons of plastic waste enters the ocean each year, causing marine animals to die and negatively impacting water quality.

Our family came to know Sidibé and hear his story through Marcelo, who during his first year as a Lay Missioner in Brazil, created an inspiring radio program called "Vozes da Migração" (Voices of Migration). I remember the first time I happened to be tuned in to Radio Cantareira when Marcelo's program aired... Hearing the rhythms of music native to Bolivia and listening to the story of a Bolivian immigrant he had interviewed was fascinating and fun!

Marcelo's radio program had the objective of sharing the stories and character of immigrants by giving immigrants an opportunity to talk about their lives, experiences, and musical preferences. Radio Cantareira, the station at which Marcelo worked as a volunteer and produced Vozes da Migração, is a nonprofit community radio station that was founded by a group of community leaders (including a Maryknoll Lay Missioner) in 1996 with the objective of developing communication projects in the community that promote popular education, environmental education, youth enrichment, culture and social engagement. Since its inception Radio Cantareira has aired programming that aims to promote social movements, defend human rights, denounce injustice and promote improvements in public policy.

Beyond their production of programming, the association has implemented diverse projects including a successful adult literacy program, youth training programs, theater workshops, human rights advocacy, and healthy eating workshops, along with courses on radio media production. Upon arriving in Brazil, Marcelo participated in a course on radio production in order to gain a foundation in the technical knowledge helpful for volunteering at Radio Cantareira and developing his program.

Sidibé was one of the first immigrants who Marcelo interviewed. During the interview he described arriving in São Paulo in 2014 as a refugee, escaping the Mali Civil War. Arriving in São Paulo he spoke no Portuguese and had no personal contacts. He initially stayed at the Arsenal da Esperança, (Arsenal of Hope) an expansive shelter for immigrants and homeless people that is led by a partnership between an Italian fraternity of lay people and priests along with local Brazilian lay people. Sidibé remembers fondly the warmth and care of the priests and volunteers who run Arsenal, and especially those who volunteer to teach Portuguese to the refugees. During the interview, Sidibé expressed gratitude to Brazilians for

the warmhearted welcome they offer to immigrants and refugees. He feels grateful to be earning a living in Brazil. For now he works selling coconut water and assists at a store that sells tea and medicinal herbs; in the future he hopes to open a salon. While he left a large family and full life behind in Mali and arrived not knowing anyone in Brazil, since arriving here he has made many friends.

Sitting by Sidibé's mobile sidewalk stand, our daughter Maëlle sipped cool water from a coconut, and I continued to marvel at the fact that he was going to the extra expense of purchasing compostable straws for his customers. As we sat there, various passers by called out to Sidibé by name with a warm greeting, or stopped to chat. Clearly he has built up rapport with many park-goers through his kindness and attentiveness.

Sidibé gave Maëlle a big spin and held our baby Lucia as I gathered our backpacks so that we could go on our way. I feel grateful to know Sidibé and for the moments our family has shared with him. As with so many refugees and immigrants, Sidibé has a unique story, is making a unique contribution and has a strong spirit.

Some of the songs from Mali that Sidibé recommended and Marcelo incorporated into the program that aired his interview were:

"La Différence" by Salif Keita

"Ai Du" by Ali Farka Touré

"Moussolou" and "Fadjamou" by Oumou Sangaré

Link to Marcelo's Radio Program (a Google Drive Filé):

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vZOCbu32w4f3GNC8AI-CmsOsqXPHQOhZ/view?usp=drivesdk>