

Thiago Firmino: From makeshift entrepreneurship in the periphery to social redefinition

Community leader and entrepreneur is transforming his role in his community, even in the face of territory-based difficulties in a pandemic besieged world

by Mariane Del Rei

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translated by Stephanie Reist



Tandy Firmino

Something Raull Santiago, a community activist from the favelas of Complexo do Alemão, likes to say has always made a lot of sense to me: “Get to know the whole world, but never forget your own backyard.” In writing about someone who is Born of the Periphery, who could represent through their plurality what the periphery is, this phrase strikes me as very important. And, in searching through thousands of faces that represent favelas and peripheries in powerful and unparalleled ways, Thiago Firmino came to mind. With a spontaneous speaking style and a wide smile, the grandson of Dona Cinira, a child of Santa Marta Hill in the Botafogo neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro’s South Zone, Thiago is the portrait of Brazil’s peripheries. In him, we see the thousands of impoverished, Black, children that live in favelas who manage to contradict statistics and demonstrate the potential of favelas as territories and guiding influences within their residents’ lives.

The boy from Santa Marta

The son of a man from Espirito Santo and a woman from the city of Rio de Janeiro,

Thiago Firmino, now 40 years old, starting working in social programs in his favela when he was 13, going against the stereotypical and already-given destiny that society assumes for Black boys that grow up in favelas. Part of a family that worked in ballroom dancing, Firmino grew up surrounded by music and heard rhythms and styles from a variety of different genres. He began dancing at 14 years old and, by 17, was already giving lessons himself. At 21, playing at friends' birthday parties and school events, he learned how to mix and became a DJ. Self-taught, Firmino learned his skills in the "academy of life," in the daily routine of the favela, in the school of hard realities of someone who lived in a wooden shack until 2004.

Of his childhood memories, those that he most cherishes are just like those of any other kid from the periphery who grew up in the 80s: flying a kite, playing soccer, playing with marbles, playing stick ball, and many other pastimes. "It was only bad when 'wars' would break out. Days would go by where we wouldn't be able to play, filled with crushing fear. Sometimes, they would last weeks. It wasn't easy, but in the end, I had a happy childhood," he tells me, nostalgically.

Entrepreneur of himself, of life, and of hustles

In 2008, after taking countless friends from other neighborhoods up to Santa Marta, Firmino got the idea to found Favela Santa Marta Tour, the company he's run for the last 13 years. Firmino considers himself a born entrepreneur with a number of different specialties because he believes that he always had to be an entrepreneur of himself.

With Favela Santa Marta Tour, Firmino wants to demonstrate that just because he lives in a favela, that doesn't mean that his services lack quality or excellence. To strengthen Santa

Marta's socioeconomic situation, he established partnerships with local business owners in order to create a new sustainable business network that promotes the creative and reciprocal economy of the favela.

"We opened two handicraft and souvenir stores and established partnerships with restaurants and bars so we could include a gastronomic experience in our tour packages with tourists and schools, in order to create income for community residents. Among the activities that we offered during our tours, visitors can make and fly their own kite and play soccer games created by residents.

We created a capoeira exhibition and offered a lesson to people who have never had any experiences with this martial art and its cultural and ancestral heritage. We also created the *Lajão Cultural* (Grand Cultural Terrace), an event space with state of the art technology and infrastructure where we organize parties and receive artists, intellectuals, influencers and nation and international celebrities."

Before the pandemic, Thiago created roughly 25 jobs, both directly and indirectly. In addition, he also sought to use local enterprise as a tool to foster social responsibility in the community. Favela Santa Marta Tour led trips that collected textbooks, school supplies, and construction material to donate to local kindergartens and schools, in addition to donating food parcels to the region's most vulnerable families. Due to the pandemic, Favela Santa Marta Tour is not currently operating; Firmino, however, plans to restart the business once some semblance of normal life returns.

"More than just providing for myself and my family, Favela Santa Marta Tour also grew out of a deep desire to generate income for and bring resources to those without. I also wanted to break the negative stigma of the favela as a site of only danger. The favela is so much more than that. We also have art, culture, leisure, and entertainment. The feeling of love and belonging that I have for Santa Marta Hill allowed me to discern things well beyond what other people see. And I wanted to show this to Brazil and the world."



From successful business to pandemic chaos: redefining knowledge

When the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus first emerged, Firmino felt lost. With tourism on hold due to social distancing measures, the entrepreneur saw a crisis coming, and with it, pain and suffering. “We were never trained for anything like this, and we already suffer all year long from the lack of water, electricity, and basic sanitation.

When I saw that the virus had reached here, I thought: ‘We’re going to suffer from this too now?’ It can’t be. I worried about the people who work with me, with Santa Marta’s small business owners and with its residents in general,” he said, remembering his initial grief.

On the internet, Firmino took notice of a video in Wuhan, China, where the authorities were disinfecting the city streets. At first, Thiago thought the equipment in the video had to be some sort of advanced technology.

But he later discovered that the devices in the video were the same that farmers use to apply pesticides to their crops and that the suits were the same ones used to paint cars. He realized he could do the same thing in the favela.

He spoke with an infectious diseases scientist and a chemist to decide what types of chemicals to use to sanitize the roads, and, together with his brother Tandy Firmino and ten volunteers, Thiago founded Santa Marta Against Covid-19, making Santa Marta the first sanitized favela in the world. Firmino shared his methodology with other favelas, including Babilônia, Chapéu Mangueira, Pavão-Pavãozinho, Providência, Vidigal, as well as the Jesuítas urban occupation and other peripheries in Rio de Janeiro and in Jesus de Nazaré, in the city of Vitória, Espírito Santo.

“All of the work done by Santa Marta Against Covid-19 is volunteer work. Since we cannot

work to finance this project, we depend exclusively on donations in order to continue to sanitize Santa Marta. We started sanitizing the entire favela twice a week. Right now, we sanitize roads, side streets, and alleys once a week.

We start at 5 am every Saturday. We also distribute masks and hand sanitizer to residents. In April 2021, it will mark one year that we've been doing this project and, to this day, we have not received any money from the government. But we won't stop. As long as there are donations to continue sanitizing the favela, we won't quit, because we know we've saved lives doing this."



Carlos Fabal





Carlos Fabal

Ellan Lustosa





Ellan Lustosa

Ellan Lustosa





Ellan Lustosa

Raull Santiago's saying, quoted at the beginning of this text, remains relevant. The favela

and periphery continually demonstrate their potential as territories and guiding influences in the lives of their residents. Thiago Firmino represents the favela, the periphery, in all of its plurality, in powerful and unparalleled ways, just like all of the people who call it home. They are mirrors. Firmino is the favela. The favela is Firmino. The periphery is the Joãos and Marias and so many others in this Brazil of multiple faces, a Brazil with so many "Brazils" inside it. And everything that the periphery has is itself. The periphery is the personification of "us for us." For this reason, those who are born of it know the whole world, but never forget their own backyard.
