

February 22, 2013

The President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

c/o Julie Chavez Rodriguez
Associate Director of Latino Affairs and Immigration
Office of Public Engagement

Dear Mr. President,

I am writing to urge you to posthumously award legendary organizer Fred W. Ross (1910-1992) with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. As an independent journalist, I have written for national publications that include the *New York Times* and *The Nation*, and have spent the last four years researching a forthcoming biography of Ross. After conducting dozens of interviews and examining numerous archives related to Ross, I cannot think of another person more worthy of such an honor. From interned Japanese Americans to Dust Bowl refugees and migrant farm workers, Ross spent his life laboring on behalf of the dispossessed, nurturing some of the most important leaders of the twentieth century, including Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta.

It is common for the biographer of a relatively unknown individual to note how remarkable it is that their subject hasn't received more attention. Not so for Ross. That few people know his name is unfortunate but understandable, because his life was consciously dedicated to laboring behind the scenes. As Ross was fond of stating, "An organizer is a leader who does not lead but gets behind the people and pushes." He spent his life pushing people to lead—in living rooms, in union halls, on picket lines—and was so effective that he pushed himself right out of most history books.

Yet there is no doubt that he was a witness to, and instigator of, some of the most profound social movements of his day. After graduating from the University of Southern California, he managed the government-run Arvin Migrant Camp near Bakersfield, home to desperate dustbowl refugees—the same camp fictionalized by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*. During WWII he secured the release of thousands of Japanese internees, and at the war's conclusion organized Black and Mexican-American parents in Southern California, culminating in the first successful school desegregation case in the country, *Mendez vs. Westminster*—seven years before *Brown vs. Board*. (Thurgood Marshall, then of the NAACP, would file an amicus brief in the case.)

Managing the dustbowl camp at the height of the Depression exposed Ross to extreme poverty; seeing the Japanese confined to internment camps shocked Ross with its straightforward racism. But it was in Southern California that Ross shifted from helping people to encouraging them to help themselves. In other words, he became an organizer.

As an organizer, Ross would serve as a key catalyst to the birth of Latino political power in California. Across the state, few Mexican-Americans voted, with many Spanish-speaking communities accustomed to being ignored by politicians and abused by police. Using the

organizing techniques he pioneered in the school desegregation fights, Ross led a groundbreaking voter registration campaign in the East Los Angeles neighborhood of Boyle Heights that elected Edward Roybal to city council in 1949, who became the first Latino councilmember since the 1800s.

Using this success as a springboard, Ross spent the 1950s traveling up and down the state, forming chapters of the Community Service Organization (CSO). The CSO was truly a trailblazing organization: members registered half a million Latinos to vote; passed statewide legislation to grant pensions to 50,000 non-citizen farmworkers (at the height of the McCarthy era, no less); turned the ignored barrios of places like San Jose to Salinas into political forces; and helped lay the groundwork for the United Farm Workers and Chicano civil rights movements of the 1960s.

It was during this period that Ross mentored some of the most important Latino leaders in American history. In 1952 he knocked on the door of a skeptical young man named Cesar Chavez, who initially tried to scare the stranger away. Instead, Ross ended up serving as Chavez's lifelong mentor. "He started talking—and changed my life," Chavez recalled. Three years later, Ross encountered a single mother named Dolores Huerta, who was planning a career in teaching. After listening to Ross, Huerta abandoned her teaching plans and began a lifetime of activism. (She would be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011). A decade later, Chavez and Huerta formed what became the United Farm Workers, using techniques learned from Ross to do what most said was impossible: organize farm workers. Ross would go on to lead critical election and boycott fights while training an entire generation of organizers at the UFW, including mentoring a young Marshall Ganz, who in 2008 would help develop your own grassroots organizing model that proved so critical to the campaign.

Ross died with little fanfare more than two decades ago. He continued to organize into his seventies, while living in a one-room cabin and surviving mostly on social security. But he never second-guessed his career choice. In 1985, he told an interviewer, "All my life I've been looking to go to work with people who are in trouble of some kind. My goal was to help the people do away with fear—fear to speak up and demand their rights."

Ours is a more just, humane, and compassionate country because of Ross, whose trailblazing work echoes ever more loudly today. There is no better time to award Ross with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and no better President to bestow the honor than you, who deeply understands the true value—and immense challenges—of organizing. I urge you to consider granting Ross this award.

Sincerely,

Gabriel Thompson

Oakland, CA