

February 27, 2013

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500-0004

Dear President Obama,

I am writing to ask you to award posthumously the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Fred Ross, Sr., an American citizen who "...made an especially meritorious contribution to the ...national interests of the United States."

To paraphrase Lord Acton, "Powerlessness tends to corrupt, and absolute powerless tends to corrupt absolutely." A situation in which millions of citizens and workers lack the means for participation in economic and political life could only be characterized as an absolutely corrupt threat to the national interests of a democracy like the United States. It was because of Fred Ross, Sr., that generations of community and union organizers learned how to build the collective power of ordinary working people necessary for active engagement in democracy.

I was an organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) from 1986 to 1999, and then a union organizer with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters from 2001 to 2010. In both organizations, organizers were successful to the extent that they recruited and trained leaders, taught them how to develop their followers, and enabled them to work together to craft a strategy that would end up in a successful negotiation with those in power about the issues that mattered to them, their families, and their communities.

In my experience, the first (and constant) challenge was to overcome the fear, cynicism, defeatism, and hopelessness engendered by powerlessness. While with the IAF, I had the privilege of working with Fred Ross, Jr., the son of Fred Ross, Sr. He is a man who embodied what his father lived and breathed. He, in turn, passed on to me lessons about building power that he learned from his father. The tactics of individual meetings and small house meetings were an effective antidote to hopelessness, for in these meetings, individuals discovered that trust, based on reflection on shared experiences, could lead to action, instead of passivity. As you know, Mr. President, without action, values have no real existence, and love is mere sentimentality.

I, for one, am grateful for what I received from Fred Ross, Sr., and the organizers who learned from him. I urge you to confer the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously upon Fred Ross, Sr. This recognition would be a beacon of hope for living and future organizers committed to a healthy and vibrant American democracy.

Sincerely,



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