



EXECUTIVE CHAMBERS
HONOLULU

NEIL ABERCROMBIE
GOVERNOR

March 15, 2013

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

I am writing to ask you to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom, posthumously, to Mr. Fred Ross, Sr., a singular American whose largely unsung accomplishments and leadership over nearly half of century propelled our society forward in the areas of racial and economic justice, collective action, and citizenship engagement.

Mr. Ross was a tremendous advocate who educated and inspired people of all races and backgrounds to overcome fear, despair and cynicism. He was a pioneer who fought for racial and economic justice. And, perhaps most importantly, he empowered others – ranging from interned World War II Japanese-Americans to our nation’s farm workers – to lead for themselves.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, Mr. Ross organized “Dust Bowl” refugees in the migratory worker camps, helping them form camp councils and self-governance. In the mid-1940s, he worked with Japanese-Americans during World War II, organizing community support to combat wartime hysteria and prejudice, and he helped newly released “internees” find employment and housing in Cleveland and San Francisco.

After WWII, in the midst of KKK activity, he organized eight Civic Unity Leagues in California’s Citrus Belt, bringing Mexican-Americans and African-Americans together to battle segregation in schools, skating rinks and movie theatres. In Orange County, he organized parents to fight the practice of segregation in local schools and successfully integrated School Boards across the Citrus Belt through voter registration drives and civic engagement. One of the most dramatic outcomes of Mr. Ross’s work in Orange County occurred when parents sued the School Districts and prevailed (*Mendez et al vs. Westminster School District, et al. 1947*), creating the legal precedent for the landmark *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision.

In 1947, American community organizer and writer Saul Alinsky hired Mr. Ross to organize the Community Service Organization (CSO) in Los Angeles' Eastside Barrio. Two years later, the CSO helped elect Ed Roybal as the first Hispanic ever elected to the Los Angeles City Council.

In the early 1950s, Mr. Ross met Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, who he recruited to become fulltime organizers with the CSO, and served as their lifetime mentor. Together with CSO leaders across California and Arizona, they successfully overcame voter suppression efforts and passed landmark legislation on behalf of immigrants.

Mr. Ross recruited and trained many other Hispanic leaders, including Cruz Reynoso who was later appointed the first Hispanic Supreme Court Justice in California and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2000. In 1965, as part of the "War on Poverty," Ross worked through Syracuse University and trained many of the organizers who went on to be leaders in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in the deep south.

Fred Ross Sr. is perhaps best remembered for his work with America's farm workers and their struggle for justice and dignity during the 1960s and 1970s. He trained close to 2,000 grape and lettuce boycott and strike organizers in every major city in the United States and Toronto. The immense pressure that resulted from massive collective action led to the passage of the historic California Agricultural Labor Relations Act signed into law by California Governor Jerry Brown in 1975.

He also recruited and trained young farm worker Eliseo Medina, who dedicated years to the United Farm Workers (UFW), became the Secretary Treasurer for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and is a leading advocate for comprehensive immigration reform today.

In 1983, Fred Ross Sr. joined his son, Fred Ross Jr., and trained organizers to defeat the unfair Recall election of San Francisco Mayor Diane Feinstein, who had been targeted because of her support for tough gun control regulation in the aftermath of the assassination of Mayor George Moscone and Harvey Milk. Fred Ross Sr.'s house meeting method was instrumental in recruiting the hundreds of volunteers who turned out to defeat the Recall by an 80% margin.

In the mid-1980s, Fred Ross Sr. again joined his son to train yet another generation of organizers to challenge the Reagan foreign policy in Central America.

Although he passed away in 1992 at the age of 82, Fred Ross Sr.'s enduring legacy as an organizer, mentor and advocate has never been more relevant or important to our democracy. In recognition of this unsung hero, I urge you, Mr. President, to confer the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously upon Fred Ross, Sr.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Neil Abercrombie". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

NEIL ABERCROMBIE
Governor, State of Hawai'i

NA/rs/my/kd