

Eileen M. Purcell, MSW

March 5, 2013

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

RE: Conferral of the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Fred Ross Sr.

Dear President Obama,

During the recent unveiling of the beautiful Rosa Park statue in the United States Capitol's Statuary Hall, you remarked that "*{Rosa Parks}reminds us that this is how change happens -- not mainly through the exploits of the famous and the powerful, but through the countless acts of often anonymous courage and kindness and fellow feeling and responsibility that continually, stubbornly, expand our conception of justice -- our conception of what is possible.*" (Wright, Marion Edelman, *Rosa Parks Before and After*, Huffington Post, 3/1/2013)

Fred Ross Sr., was such a man: a brilliant organizer whose life is a collection of courageous acts intended to inspire and train others to stand up and demand their human and civil rights and the fulfillment of the American promise.

Though I didn't meet Mr. Ross until the mid 1980s, I was introduced to his organizing methods in 1976 as an undergraduate student at Stanford University when I participated in the United Farm Workers' (UFW) struggle for basic labor and human rights. These included the right to organize, the right to water, bathroom breaks and a decent wage. It also included the effort to ban the short handled hoe.

In 1979, as a newly minted community organizer working for the Catholic Archdiocese of San Francisco, I drew on my UFW experience to organize the local and national movement in support of Central American refugees and for an end to the senseless wars ravaging the region. Thousands were being slaughtered, the overwhelming majority by the US-supported military regimes. Hundreds of thousands were fleeing north to escape the violence, only to be summarily deported. In 1980 the world was shocked when Salvadoran military forces assassinated Archbishop Romero and raped and murdered 4 U.S. church women. But US policy remained unchanged.

That same year, I met Fred Ross Jr. who helped me recruit UFW veteran organizer, Paul Milne -- a student of Fred Ross Sr. -- to train me and my team at Catholic Social Service (CSS) in the art of house meetings. House meetings were one of the methods we employed to tell the story of thousands of Central American refugees fleeing the war and to educate, train and

mobilize thousands of religious and lay men and women. Together, refugees and people of faith called upon our local, state and federal elected representatives to end the summary deportations and to end military aid to the brutal militaries in Central America. We built a powerful coalition with labor, civil rights organizations, immigrant rights attorneys and advocates.

In 1980, we established the Ad Hoc Committee to Stop the Deportations. We deluged the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) with calls demanding an end to the deportations, and held vigils and informational pickets outside their offices.

In 1981, we worked with the ILWU to declare a boycott on arms shipments to El Salvador. We organized the Archdiocese of San Francisco, the Northern California Ecumenical Council, the California State Federation of Labor, and virtually every Central Labor Council in the greater Bay Area to support the ILWU as they carried out the historic arms shipment boycott to El Salvador up and down the Pacific coast. The arms boycott was a precursor to the Neighbor-to-Neighbor coffee boycott Fred Ross Jr would lead in the late 1980s. We became a living example of anthropologist Margaret Meade's age-old quote, "*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has*".

We were so effective, that the Reagan White House dispatched Undersecretary of State Elliott Abrams to visit the Archdiocese. Abrams alleged that allegations of human rights violations were exaggerated and that purported refugees were receiving due process. More than 300 refugees, priests, sisters, and lay men and women – including Fred Ross Jr. and myself – packed the Chancery office for the mid-afternoon dialogue with Mr. Abrams. We also invited the Catholic and secular press. Ten of us who had spent anywhere from 1 month to 36 years in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua were designated to propound questions to Mr. Abrams. Sister Margaret Cafferty, pbvm, the future leader of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) spoke truth to power when she described her sisters' experience of landmines in Nicaragua and said "*I don't want a penny of my tax dollars going to the illegal and immoral wars in Central America.*" Maryknoll priest, Ron Burke, described the slaughter of his Guatemalan village, and his own flight when it was learned he and his delegates of the Word were at the top of a military hit list. I asked Mr. Abrams what his definition of "due process" consists of when fewer than 2% of political asylum applications from Salvadorans and Guatemalans were being denied even though the United Nations had declared them "*prima facie*" refugees. The meeting was headline news in the San Francisco papers and the National Catholic Reporter. Ten years later, Mr. Abrams was charged and convicted of lying to Congress about the Iran-Contra scandal.

In 1982 on the second anniversary of the assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, we launched the public sanctuary movement. Five congregations gathered at the University Lutheran Chapel in Berkeley to declare our commitment to "*defend, protect and advocate*" for Central Americans refugees. Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona announced their decision to be a public sanctuary on the same day. It was national news.

Over the next four years, we grew the number of public sanctuary communities to more than 500 congregations from across the denominational spectrum and across the United States. It became known as the new "*Underground Railroad*."

In 1985 our organizing led to the declaration of San Francisco as one of twenty three sanctuary cities across the United States. We brought together the Board of Supervisors, the Mayor, the City Attorney, the Sheriff's Department, immigrant rights advocates, attorneys, faith groups and the refugees, themselves, to craft effective policies that safeguarded basic human rights and the safety of our City. The Sanctuary ordinance remains on the books today.

From pulpits, living rooms, convents, schools and shipping yards to City Halls, labor halls and Congressional Halls, refugees told their stories, and thousands of ordinary citizens organized and brought pressure upon the Reagan White House to halt summary deportations of Salvadorans and Guatemalans and the illegal and immoral wars in Central America. We shone the light on these human rights atrocities and the glaring contradiction between US policy and the 1980 US Refugee Act and International Law.

The government's response: infiltration, wiretapping, surveillance of sanctuary congregations and social service agencies such as CSS, and the indictment of fourteen religious leaders in Tucson, Arizona.

Our response: the strengthening of our resolve and the formation of the National Sanctuary Defense Fund, (NSDF). We applied the Fred Ross Sr axiom, "*Good organizers never give up, they get the opposition to do that.*" NSDF and the Sanctuary Movement raised millions of dollars with the help of veteran direct mail fundraiser Bernie Mazel and countless others for whom NSDF became a vehicle to exercise moral agency. We educated the broad public on the governmental crackdown in Central America and in the US, supported high impact litigation in support of refugees and provided legal representation for those of us who accompanied them.

We rallied, persisted, built coalitions, and never gave up. We created institutions and relationships that were intergenerational, interracial, and international, just like Fred Ross Sr. had done in the earlier part of the century. We were nourished by the faith and resilience of the extraordinary Central Americans who persisted in the face of unthinkable atrocities and by the memory of trailblazers whose courage had stood up against slavery, the Holocaust, Japanese-American internment, and unjust wars and persecutions.

Collective action led to hope.

In 1991, after ten years battling in the court of public opinion and in the legal courts, the sanctuary movement celebrated the landmark legal victory, the American Baptist Church et al vs. Thornbourg in which the US government agreed to reopen half a million political asylum cases in light of the US government's failure to honor the due process of Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees during the war. A year later, the Peace Accords were signed in El Salvador.

For the last twenty years I have continued my work as an organizer and have been privileged to be Fred Ross Jr.s organizing partner. I learned that we not only share a passion for organizing for social justice but that we came about our love of this work through our parents.

Our mothers were social justice advocates – his an educator and advocate; mine a social worker. Our fathers both played important roles in the defense of Japanese Americans during World War II. Fred Sr. organized interned Japanese-Americans to fight for an end to discrimination as they sought work and housing. My father, James Purcell, defended Japanese Americans in court. He represented Mitsuye Endo in front of the US Supreme Court, leading to the landmark Supreme Court decision -- *Ex parte Endo*, or *Ex parte Mitsuye Endo*, 323 U.S. 283 (1944) -- that led President Franklin Roosevelt to rescind Executive Order 9066 (the order which authorized the evacuation of Japanese and Japanese-American citizens from the West coast) in December, 1944. For years after the war, my father quietly but fiercely represented many other Japanese Americans as they sought to reclaim their homes, businesses, jobs and pensions that had been virtually stolen during the war.

In 1981, Fred Ross Sr. and my father testified during the Redress Hearings in San Francisco. They demanded reparations for the surviving Nisei and their families. They emphasized that while no amount of money could adequately compensate for the costly violation of civil rights, restitution of some form constituted a powerful gesture and a critical step toward reconciliation and national healing. Symbols matter.

Their lives testify to the best of human nature: solidarity in the pursuit of human and civil rights, hard work, collective action, countless acts and gestures of kindness and courage for the Common Good.

By conferring this award on Fred Ross Sr., you elevate the vision he offered and the labor of love he bequeaths us. You emphasize our shared humanity and global citizenship.

In these challenging times in which cynicism and despair threaten our national spirit, let this award to a selfless and committed organizer be a sign of enduring hope and possibility.

With gratitude and hope,
Eileen Purcell, Organizer