

March 4, 2013

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

Dear Mr. President,

We are writing to urge you to confer the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Fred Ross Sr. in recognition of his life's work on behalf of immigrants, human dignity, and full citizenship.

During WWII, Fred Ross Sr. helped thousands of Japanese Americans in Cleveland, Ohio and San Francisco fight discrimination in housing and employment in the midst of wartime hysteria, during one of the most shameful periods of U.S. history. He built alliances and coalitions with religious, labor and civic leaders to effectively challenge the systematic denial of civil and human rights. At the 1981 Redress Hearings in San Francisco, he testified publicly about the importance of reparations to thousands of Japanese-American families.

After World War II, 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 the segregation of 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 his work in Orange County occurred when parents sued the School Districts and prevailed. (*Mendez et al vs. Westminster School District, et al.*), creating the legal precedent and laying the foundation for the landmark *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision.

In 1947 Saul Alinsky and local Latino leaders hired Ross to work in East Los Angeles at the beginning of the McCarthy period. Together with local leaders, over a six week period Ross conducted more than 125 house meetings which led to a founding convention of one thousands residents in east LA's Boyle Heights and the formation of the Community Service Organization (CSO). In the face of voter suppression, they launched a citizenship campaign coupled with a voter registration drive and built a powerful coalition of religious, labor and civil rights organizations. They elected Edward Roybal, the first Mexican-American to be elected to the LA City Council in history. One of CSO's most significant victories occurred in the wake of the severe beating of seven men, five of them Latinos, by Los Angeles police on December 25, 1951, known as "Bloody Christmas," leaving the victims with broken bones and ruptured organs. Because the CSO leaders had built a powerful coalition, they were able to secure grand jury indictments and criminal convictions for the first time in the history of the L. A. police department. The telling of that story by Ross, a year and a half later, in the home of Cesar and Helen Chavez in the barrio of "Sal Si Puedes," enabled Ross to overcome suspicion and win credibility and trust of Chavez.

Over the next ten years, the CSO expanded to more than 22 chapters across California and Arizona, registered more than 500,000 new Mexican American voters and assisted 50,000 immigrants to pursue their dream of citizenship. On July 12, 1961, CSO leaders completed an eight year struggle to win state legislation in Sacramento, Assembly Bill #5, sponsored by the legendary Assemblyman Phil Burton, which repealed the Citizenship requirement as a prerequisite to receive “old age assistance.”

In 1962 Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta and Gilbert Padilla formed the UFW, where Fred Ross would continue to work for the next fifteen years. He trained more than 2,000 organizers in the art and science of organizing, from house meetings to boycott and strike committees. Many of the young men and women Ross trained fill the ranks of social justice movements across the country today, and play leadership roles in more than 18 international unions.

Service Employees International Union Secretary-Treasurer, Eliseo Medina, a teenage grape striker when Ross trained him as a UFW organizer, said “I had no idea what being an organizer meant, but Fred Ross taught us. He had thirty of us, mostly young farm workers, who had no idea of what we were doing. Discipline was a very important part of it, being organized, analytical, and having a plan and working it – staying on that plan. He drilled that into us.” (Latino Leaders Magazine, August 2001)

The late Father Bill O’Donnell once said of Ross, “Great people don’t have to be in the history books. They leave behind a legacy. (Ross) empowered the powerless with weapons such as non violence, the house meeting, the strike, the boycott.”

In recognition of Fred Ross’s body of work and his lifetime defending and promoting the basic civil and human rights of immigrants and all marginalized and outcast people, we strongly urge you to confer the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Fred Ross Sr.

Sincerely,

Ryan Bates, Alliance for Immigrant Rights (MI) and Michigan Organizing Project

Lawrence Benito and Josh Hoyt, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

Deepak Bhargava, Center for Community Change

Rea Carey, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

Petra Falcon, Promise Arizona

Morna Ha and Son Ah Yun, National Korean American Service and Education Consortium

Marielena Hincapie, National Immigration Law Center

Deepa Iyer, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)

Benjamin Johnson, American Immigration Council

Larry Kleinman and Ramon Ramirez, PCUN: Oregon’s Farmworker’s Union

Francisco Lopez, CAUSA Oregon

Megan Macaraeg and Stephen Fotopulos, Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition

Eliseo Medina, Service Employees International Union

Christine Neumann-Ortiz, Voces de la Frontera (WI)

Ali Noorani, National Immigration Forum

Priscilla Ouchida, Japanese American Citizens League

Angelica Salas, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles

Frank Sharry, America's Voice

Rich Stolz, OneAmerica

Gustavo Torres, Casa de Maryland

Javier Valdes, Make the Road NY