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President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave.
Washington D.C 20500

c/o
Julie Chavez Rodriguez
Associate Director
Latino Affairs and Immigration
for the Office of Public
Engagement
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February 12, 2013

Dear President Obama,

Momentum is building among leaders from all walks of life – labor leaders, religious leaders, political leaders, academic leaders, community leaders – to honor the father of modern grass roots organizing. I am writing to urge that you recognize Fred Ross Sr. for the Presidential Freedom Award.

Fred's life-long commitment to help the poor, his life-long efforts to end discrimination, and his dedication to teaching non-ideological effective organizing, have been documented by many much more prominent and articulate than I.

Given how much he accomplished in life, what is truly remarkable about Fred Ross was how little he desired recognition. Today, over 20 years after his death, people still are applying his lessons and benefiting from his teachings and his example.

I met Fred over 40 years ago, when I was 22. I was fresh out of college. I can say unequivocally, that other than my family, Fred had the most profound influence on my life. For over 25 years Fred taught, inspired, and challenged me. Fred is the reason why I established *The Organizing and Leadership Academy,* whose mission is to teach a new generation of young people Fred's organizing lessons. His teachings have been the foundation of our curriculum.

I spent 11 years as an organizer in the UFW, where Fred was revered, having trained almost all of our successful organizers. I spoke to Fred about problems I was seeing in the public schools – lack of funding, inadequate facilities, and discrimination. Fred characteristically challenged me by saying, "Well quit jawing about it, and do something. You know how to organize."

With Fred's encouragement, I began organizing parents to fight for more funding and to pass tax measures to support schools. Over the past 25 years, using the skills he taught me, we have been able to pass over 300 tax measures totaling over $50 billion in improvements and renovated schools in almost every community in California. John Burton, former Senate Pro Tem in California, said our efforts did more to help public schools than the California Legislature. This was all due to Fred's teachings.

I have attached a document you may find interesting. The first part is a selection of Fred's pithy, thought provoking 'Axioms for Organizers,' which boils down a lot of Fred's organizing philosophy.

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The second part is a description of Fred's teaching methods that I wrote about in my book on organizing: *Sidewalk Strategies, A practical guide for candidates, causes, and communities*.

It is my sincere hope that you will honor Fred Ross Sr., and by association *all* the people who organize without fame or fortune to improve communities throughout our country.

By best to you and your family.

Sincerely,

Larry Tramutola

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Appendix I from *SIDEWALK STRATEGIES*

Fred Ross's Axioms for Organizers

Fred Ross died in 1992, at the age of 82, in Marin County, California. His work touched and influenced thousands of people who today fight for social justice, better working conditions, better pay for workers, and an end to violence and war. Although he never finished his book on organizing, his lessons continue to inspire new generations of organizers.

After his death, Fred's son, Fred G. Ross, compiled some of his father's lessons into a small pocket-sized book called *Axioms for Organizers*. Others were gathered from memories of organizers who had the pleasure of working with Fred. I have included many of them in this book, but here are a few more.

- If you think you can do it for people, you've stopped under- standing what it means to be an organizer.
- Ninety percent of organizing is follow-up.
- It's easy to win people—and twice as easy to lose them.
- "Maybe" is a double, triple "No!"
- Rare is the delivered message.
- Nothing is less likely to be delivered than a message.
- It's not the quantity of pressure we exert that counts; it's the quality.
- When you are pushing a big drive or issue, you stay on it to the total exclusion of everything else—until it is done.
- Never get so hungry for volunteers that you do their work for them instead of insisting they do it themselves.
- Appreciation has an exceedingly short memory, so strike while the iron is hot.
- Don't let them kick you around. You have to live and organize in such a way that you can respect yourself and be treated with respect by others.
- Organizers must grow beyond helping people to "egging them on."
- To keep an organization alive, you've got to find that person who has to do something about it.
- The disrupter is the lowest form of organizational life.
- Look out for the fast talkers.

Excerpt from *SIDEWALK STRATEGIES*

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CANDIDATES, CAUSES, AND COMMUNITIES

by Larry Tramutola

I learned about commitment from a man named Fred Ross. I first met Fred Ross in Salinas, California, "The Lettuce Capital of the World," during the Lettuce Strike in 1970. Few people outside of the farm worker movement knew who Fred was, but his legend was growing.

Ross' most famous disciple and student was Cesar Chavez. Cesar Chavez is now a historical icon, remembered in textbooks and through songs and documentaries. Roads, schools, libraries and parks are named after him. In California, Cesar Chavez's birthday is a state holiday, and the U.S. government has issued a stamp in his memory. But had it not been for Fred Ross and his ability to teach Cesar the importance of organizing, few people would ever have heard of Cesar Chavez. Even Chavez recognized this: "I learned quite a bit from studying Gandhi, but the first practical steps I learned from the best organizer I know, Fred Ross. He changed my life." Fred changed my life as well.

When I met Ross in Salinas he had retired from a successful career as a community organizer. But Cesar Chavez, the head of the fledgling United Farm Workers, had asked his old mentor to come to Salinas to help organize and train the United Farm Workers' staff. The UFW had just won contracts in the table grape industry and was beginning a nationwide boycott of lettuce. The Union planned to send its members and its staff to cities across the country to raise awareness of the farm workers' struggle and to build support for the boycott.

I had recently graduated from Stanford and was volunteering at a Legal Aid office hoping to get some first hand knowledge of the law before applying to law school. It was in Salinas

where I met Fred—an event that completely changed my life and turned me into a professional organizer.

I arrived in Salinas on a Saturday about midmorning. I had brought a load of donated food to the strikers and their families. After I drove up and parked my VW "square back" in the ally behind the UFW office, a half-dozen farm worker women wearing red bandannas came out and helped unload the boxes of canned goods and food from my car. Their children ran in and out of the office while, nearby, several small groups of men, laughing and arguing in Spanish, stood watching us as we came inside.

A meeting was being held in the back corner of the cavernous storefront building, perhaps a quiet neighborhood grocery store in a former life. But now there was an atmosphere of activity and energy inside. People were everywhere, standing in groups or sitting against walls on old, battered folding chairs. Several meetings were going on.

I immediately noticed Fred. He was leaning against a wall, his arms folded around a spiral notebook, and he seemed totally out of place. Unlike the farm workers who were mostly in their twenties and thirties, Fred was in his sixties and was tall and lean, with the chiseled looks of an aging Hollywood film star. He was calm and focused, seemingly unaware of the hum of activity in other parts of the large hall. He listened intently as each person, one-by one, stood up to give his or her progress report on the strike. Then, I heard him mutter under his breath, "Shit! That guy doesn't know crap about organizing. He's too undisciplined to learn." I asked the person next to me, "Who's the old guy?"

Immediately he replied, "Oh that's Fred Ross, he found and trained Cesar years ago. He's one of the few Anglos that Cesar trusts. He taught Cesar everything about organizing."

Later that evening, quite by chance, I ran into Fred at a Fosters Freeze in town. (I learned later that Fred, like me, had a weakness for their soft ice cream. "It's ice milk not cream!" he later told me). I introduced myself, said that I had come down for the day to bring food to the strikers, and I had seen him at the UFW office earlier in the day. We spoke a few minutes, and I eventually asked him, "What does it take to be an organizer?"

He looked at me over his glasses and replied, "Time, discipline and hard work. You interested?"

"I might be," I said. He grabbed a stub of a pencil from the pocket of his khaki shirt, scribbled down his name and his San Francisco phone number and said, "If you're interested, give me a call." But as he walked away, he turned and left me with a challenge and a warning of the hard road ahead: "Most don't have it in them to be any good, though."

Despite his less-than-enthusiastic encouragement, I called him on the phone a few days later. I reintroduced myself and told him I had heard that the UFW needed help and that I wanted to learn more. He said he couldn't see me immediately, since he was busy working on a book about Cesar's early organizing days, but he invited me to his home the next day.

When I arrived at his small, sparsely furnished home in the Bernal Heights area in the south end of San Francisco, what struck me at once were the piles of books and spiral notepads, filled with almost illegible writing, scattered around his living room. His kitchen table was piled with stacks of tapes for his portable recorder, and classical music was playing on his ancient record player. We talked for several hours. He spoke thoughtfully, quietly at first, about social justice and activism.

He told stories of organizing Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles in the 1950's and running the first successful campaign to elect the first Mexican-American (Ed Roybal) to the Los Angeles City Council. He talked about the voter registration campaigns he had conducted across the state to increase the political power of minorities. He talked about all the things that were accomplished—better housing, better schools, improved health care—when people organized themselves. He provided specifics on how the UFW was trying to improve the lives of farm workers and rattled off statistics about the low life expectancy of farm workers and told stories about people caught in poverty who had no hope for the future unless they organized.

His eyes flashed with anger when he spoke about police brutality against farm workers that he had witnessed. His voice cracked with emotion when he described babies born with deformities due to the use of toxic pesticides. He talked about the farm labor camps he had visited, where there was no running water, filthy sanitation, and where "labor contractors" ruled like foreign dictators.

I listened, not saying much, stunned with his knowledge and his passion, and intrigued as he described his life and successes and what he had done.

After a while, he stopped talking about himself and his work and began probing me with his piercing, penetrating gaze and words. "Why are you interested in organizing?" he asked. "Organizing," he said, "is not for everybody, and if you want to be successful, you have to know why you are doing it. If you are not committed to something more important than yourself, you'll never be successful." I asked him if I could learn to be an organizer.

"Before we talk about organizing," he said, "let's talk about you. What do you believe in?"

I was not prepared for this question. I had hoped to talk about the techniques of organizing, and I wanted to hear more stories of how he had organized people. Fred wanted to talk about the "why" of organizing.

I rambled a bit about social justice, civil rights and the antiwar movement. I talked about my own family and how my grandfather had suffered discrimination when he immigrated to the United States, and that my family had actually changed our name to blend in to American society. I told him that in college I had "sat in" to protest the Vietnam War but I that I felt ineffective. I wanted to make a difference with my life, but I had no idea where to start or what I could do.

Fred said that he had met many people like me who wanted to make a difference, but they lacked commitment. "Organizing," he said, "is a tough career, and if you can't articulate your own motivation you will have a hard time organizing others."

"You need to take some time to think of what you want to do with your life," Fred told me, "What you care about, what bothers you so much that you can sleep at night. Something must have motivated you to come to Salinas with a car full of food. What was it? Let's talk again after you have had a chance to think."

Over the next few days my mind kept going back to the meeting with Fred. I couldn't get his words out of my mind. I never had met any one like Fred. Fred thought big. Fred said that one person could change the world. Fred believed that one person, if he or she could organize others, could stop racism and discrimination and end poverty by building power for poor people. Fred had a lot of disdain for elected officials saying that politicians rarely did something worthwhile on their own and that people had to organize themselves if they wanted to improve their communities.

A few days later I called Fred and he invited me over. I told him I had thought of nothing else but our conversation the past few days. I said I was interested in learning to organize and asked if there was anything written about organizing. "Nothing any good, that's why I'm writing it" he said.

"Being an organizer takes a tremendous amount of commitment and discipline," he told me, adding that during his life as an organizer, he had found very few people who had the combination of commitment and discipline to be successful, but he was always looking. That was one of the reasons he was writing a book about Chavez's early days organizing the union—to show what Chavez had done to achieve this success.

Fred said the UFW needed people to help organize the Boycott and it was a good place to learn if I "had it" to become an organizer. "The pay is $10 a week," Fred told me, "and you get $100 a month for your rent if you stay more than a month." Luckily, I already had my own car. Reading my mind, he said, "The Union will reimburse you for gas. Keep your receipts."

"What about food?" I asked.

"That's what the ten bucks is for. But a good organizer will find others to feed him." Fred replied. He told me his son Fred Jr. was heading up the Boycott in the Bay Area and Fred Sr. would tell him that I was starting.

So with that, my "learn as you go" training on the job began. No résumé to submit, no interview. My first task was to build community support in Santa Clara County, from San Jose to Palo Alto, for the Union's boycott. I quickly learned that there were no easy steps to follow. My staff consisted of one … me. I was given a few names of local people who had sent money to the Union to support the strike, and from these few contacts, I was asked to build a small army of people who would contribute financially to the Union and support the boycott. My goal was to

recruit people to volunteer each week to pass out leaflets about the boycott at grocery stores throughout the county

"How do I get started?" I asked.

Fred gave me the name of Father Moriarty, pastor of Sacred Heart Church in San Jose.

"Visit him. Tell him what you need. He may help you."

That was my introduction to organizing. I started out on fire. I called Fr. Moriarty and he gave me names of parishioners who he thought would be supportive. I called everyone on my list of UFW supporters. Naively, I started out thinking that all I had to do was share my enthusiasm for the cause, and people would quickly contribute or volunteer; however, I soon found the task of organizing much harder than I had expected. I went to churches, to schools and unions and got names of potential supporters. But many of the people I called to help me pass out leaflets in front of stores did not show up, and I soon ran out of names to call.

I phoned Fred, frustrated and looking for answers. "I'm just not having a lot of success," I told him.

Fred, as usual, came right to the point, "Of course not. It's hard work and you obviously don't know what you're doing. To be successful, you have to sting people into action. You have to repeatedly prod them to get off their butts."

Fred said I needed to organize myself before I could organize others. When I met him at his house in Bernal Heights the next day, he had covered his living room wall with a long sheet of butcher paper. On it he had drawn vertical lines creating 14 columns on which he had marked the days of the next two weeks starting with Sunday through Saturday.

Then, he proceeded with his lesson of how to be organized and disciplined.

Pointing to the chart and handing me a colored marker, he told me, “Write down everything you have to do each day. Who are you meeting Monday?”

I went over to the butcher paper and wrote down the names and times of the three people that I was supposed to meet that day.

Fred continued, “OK, now when are you calling these people to remind them that you are coming to see them?”

Remind them I was coming to see them? “I hadn’t thought of that,” I told Fred.
“Well, write that down,” he stated firmly. “Reminding is the essence of organizing.”
He went over to butcher paper and wrote in the Sunday column: “Make reminder calls to:” Then, he listed the names and phone numbers of the people I was to visit the following Monday.

The lesson continued. “What time are you calling them?” he asked, and before I could answer, he instructed me, “Now write down the time.” I did.

But he was not through with me yet. “OK, now on Monday, before you meet with them, you need to call them again, right?” Fred asked.

I just nodded quietly while privately thinking that all this reminding and writing down was a bit of overkill. It was only weeks later that I came to understand that these details, and the discipline to put them into practice, are absolutely essential to good organizing. At the time, though, I had not learned that for myself, and I certainly did not want to challenge Fred, so I said nothing.

Fred went on. “Good. Now write on the butcher paper the time that you plan to call them, so you don’t forget. It is always good to call people right before you visit them, so you don’t waste time if they are not there.”

"And by the way," he continued, "while you are at the house of one of the people on your list, ask if you can use their phone to call your next appointment. That way they'll see how serious you are," he said.

The writing process went on for over two hours, until the butcher paper was covered with notes and reminders. Every hour of the day was accounted for, even sleeping and eating. Fred instructed me, "Estimate how much time you need for each activity—even sleep—and then put an estimated time next to it."

When we were finished, he said, "Now copy everything down in your own notebook, so you have a copy of the schedule and call me each night at 9:00 sharp and report what you have accomplished that day."

As I took out my notebook and began copying, I realized there were no days off. While the week days and evenings were devoted to calling and meeting with people, Friday afternoons and Saturdays were for picketing and leafleting. Sundays were set aside for visiting churches during the day and calling volunteers in the evening, since Sunday evening, I learned, was the best time to call because people were usually home. I even wrote down the times when I was supposed to call Fred each day—"TALK to FRED from 9–11 P.M.," I wrote in big bold letters on each day of the week.

I followed Fred's advice as best I could. Reminding people became essential to achieving success. To do it took discipline and self-organization. Sometimes I did not call people to remind them because I ran out of time or was doing something else and forgot. When that happened, I usually paid the price for my lack of discipline. Sometimes the person was not at home when I arrived at their house to meet with them, or sometimes, they came to the door and said they could not meet with me.

As he had instructed, I also called Fred each night without fail, although the phone call was torture because he would grill me mercilessly about what I had done. If I called 15 minutes late, he would scold me. “We are supposed to talk everyday at 9:00 not 9:15!”

We started every call with what I had accomplished during the day. He peppered me with probing questions that demanded thoughtful answers and accountability: “Why did you do that?” What did you say when he said that?” The interrogation went on for two hours and often longer, as I had to report and relive my successes and failures of the day. Fred asked me one question after another, and unless I was prepared to simply hang up and walk away from what I was doing, there was no escape or relief. But I endured the torment, partly out of pride and partly because I knew Fred was teaching me invaluable lessons about the importance of follow-through and disciplined work. “There are no short cuts,” Fred told me.

And so I persevered, week after week of this routine. Why he decided that I was worth taking the time to train I never knew. I did know that the hands on training I was receiving was incredible, even if I was exhausted by the long 14-16 hour days spent trying to meet people, inspire them to participate in picketing or leafleting as well as making my reminder calls so they would show up for meetings or weekend activities. I learned to make appointments with people around dinnertime and to eagerly accept offers of food. The learning process was slow and I often wondered if I had it in me to be a successful organizer.

I felt raw from Fred’s nightly “Inquisition” when he sought to uncover every short -cut and mistake I had made during the day. Not only did he call my attention to each flaw, but my admitting I had made a mistake was not enough for him. No, he wanted to know what I had learned from that failure.

For instance, after I told him about something I had done wrong, he would ask in an exasperated tone, “Well, why did you do that?” When volunteers who had promised to come to help pass out leaflets did not show up, he would say, “I’ve told you that you need to remind people to come. When you are not successful organizing, you need to take the responsibility. It is not their fault they didn’t show up. It’s yours. You either didn’t do a good job inspiring them, or you didn’t follow up and let them off the hook. Either way it’s your fault.”

And then he would give me suggestions in the form of questions on what to do to follow-up with the no-shows to get them to show up the next time. Fred’s suggestions were like techniques for getting an escaped fish back on the hook. He would ask me: “Did you call them when they didn’t show up? Did you tell them that they were letting you down and, even more importantly, that they were letting the farm workers down?”

His approach was tougher and more grueling than anything I had ever encountered before. When I attended Stanford University, I had taken courses from demanding instructors, and I had tough bosses in my various jobs through school. My own father was a hard taskmaster who required chores and homework to always be done before play. Even so, I was unprepared for Fred’s driving intensity. He considered organizing the highest form of community activism.

“You have to do it right,” he told me. “If you don’t, you’ll always be blaming something or someone else. Excuses are for failures, and you don’t want to fail. Do absolutely everything you can to keep from failing.”

So for six months, day after day with no days off, I followed Fred’s advice, doing everything he told me. I was determined to succeed, but it wasn’t easy.

As soon as he felt I had accomplished a task successfully, he demanded more of me. Once I began to successfully organize the one-on-one meetings with potential supporters, he

taught me about “house meetings,” a more efficient and effective way of reaching people than one-on-one meetings but also more difficult to organize. A house meeting is the opportunity to speak to 14-20 people per night instead of just the two or three you can meet one-on-one. They are much harder to set up because they involve getting someone to host a meeting at their house and getting that person to make sure people attend.

Fred explained how to record responses whenever I talked with people— whether in one-on-one meetings or house meetings or for anything else— just like an anthropologist has to keep careful field notes. He showed me how to develop my own call sheets which involved keeping carefully handwritten or typed lists of names, phone numbers and what I said each time I talked to them. (Remember—we were in the “pre computer, pre cell phone” age back then).

He stressed the importance of telling stories, not fictional stories, but real stories about everyday people and their lives and dreams. “You want to tell stories that illustrate the truth in human terms about poverty, hopelessness, exploitation and racism. You want to tell stories that people can relate to, that they can sympathize and empathize with, so they can put themselves in the shoes of others and feel for them. Stories can inspire people to do something with their own lives to help others. And don’t forget to tell them why YOU are doing this, they will want to know and it will be harder for them not to help when they understand your own commitment.”

Fred’s repeated statements, reminders and cautions about what to do taught me about discipline. Listen to his litany, repeated again and again:

“Don’t assume anything.”

“Take responsibility.”

“You have to remind people. Reminding people is the essence of organizing.”

"Failure is not the result of others not doing things. It is the result of you not organizing correctly."

"If you can't catch people at home during ordinary hours, you've got to go after them during extra-ordinary hours, to the outer edge of your tenacity and forbearance."

"There are usually two ways to do things, the easy way and the hard way. The hard way is usually best."

The organizing tested me physically, mentally and emotionally. It was a time of many frustrations and few successes. Fred was testing my limits and my commitment.
After a while, his admonitions began to sear firmly into my brain, and eventually, they became a part of my own philosophy. Over time, I began learning my own lessons, which I added to his.

After several months, I began to hear a few words of praise and encouragement as well. Along with the criticisms and admonitions, Fred began to say things like "Good job," or "Hmmm, I guess you have been paying attention." The praise, which had been so rare in the first few months, now became regular, and his encouragement motivated me to work even harder and to recruit others to help in our cause.

I went to college campuses and recruited students to take leaves of absence or take a semester off to work for the UFW. I asked teachers to work over the summer and nuns to ask permission from their Orders to help. All I could promise them was the $10 a week the UFW offered its organizers, but they were eager to learn, just as I had learned from Fred. In my training sessions with them, I did my best to include the same kind of intense questions and accountability, which Fred had used to grill me. And though I never was as good or as perceptive as Fred, I tried to model my training after his and to give them the best training I could.

I soon found his lessons began to pay off, and my staff grew to three, then six, then twelve. While some left after a few weeks or a few months, unable to handle the personal commitment or discipline, many stayed on, and they became excellent, committed organizers.

Over the years, Fred and I became good friends, but he was always the teacher, and I remained the student. I often called him to ask questions and obtain his insightful advice. I learned to acknowledge my shortcomings and be forthright about my failures.

“Failure,” he said, “is part of the learning process. Learn from your mistakes and don’t make them again.”