

An Organizer's Organizer

CORTE MADERA, CALIFORNIA

"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."

So says Cesar Chavez. In 1952, Chavez was a part-time lumber handler who lived with his wife and small children in the San Jose barrio known to its residents as Sal Si Puedes—meaning "get out if you can." The son of migrant farm workers and a former migrant worker himself, he wanted desperately to change the conditions under which they and thousands of others worked and lived. Fred Ross showed him how.

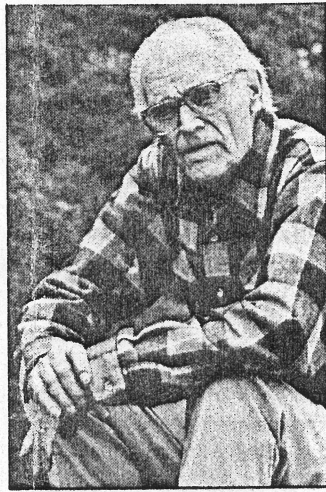
Ross's name is not a household word, though, and that speaks volumes about his success as a community organizer.

"I was never interested in becoming a leader myself," Ross says. "I was interested in working with people to help them develop as leaders."

Chavez is the most famous of those he helped, but there are many others. Ross has taken his talent, energy, and extraordinary commitment into Mexican-American communities and agricultural fields, Indian villages and low-income housing projects, all across the country. Where he found isolated individuals who had nothing—least of all, hope—he left behind organized groups whose members had gained not only hope but also the ability to turn hope into reality.

Margaret Mead wrote of Ross's "remarkable ability to help people help themselves." And Carey McWilliams once referred to his "exasperating modesty," noting that he is "the kind who never steps forward to claim his fair share of credit for any enterprise in which he is involved."

Nonetheless, Fred Ross recently sat down for a talk about



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his life as an organizer. After more than forty years on the road, living out of his car, sleeping in barren motel rooms or on cots in other people's houses, Ross has finally settled down in Corte Madera. But settling down doesn't mean retirement for this seventy-seven-year-old—only semiretirement. He's completing a book of organizing axioms. He may just get around to finishing the autobiography he started in the 1950s. And he's training community organizers for Neighbor to Neighbor, a group that combines grass-roots techniques and mass media to mobilize opposition to aid for the Nicaraguan contras. Its executive director is Fred G. Ross, his forty-year-old son.

By the time the elder Ross met Chavez in 1952, he had years of community organizing behind him. He grew up in Los Angeles, but all he knew about Hispanics was that they stayed on one side of the local swimming hole and he and his friends stayed on the other. Ross's father was a newspaperman and both parents were dyed-in-the-wool Republicans. He admits to a "sheltered youth."

At the University of Southern California, though, he encountered an economics professor whose own socialism

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showed Ross there are other ways of viewing the world. After graduation and a short stint as a social worker, he hired on with the Farm Security Administration and was shortly put in charge of the FSA's camp for migrant workers at Arvin—home to the Joad family of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Ross soon realized his sympathies lay with the workers, not with the powerful growers. At Arvin he got his first taste of community organizing. Brought in to replace a camp director known for ruling with his fists, Ross wanted residents to know he was different. His first morning in camp, he set out early to visit as many workers' tents as possible. Inviting himself in for a cup of coffee, he would stay just long enough to introduce himself and have a short chat. Gallons of coffee later, Ross had established himself as an ally. He spent two years at Arvin running the camp democratically.

Then war broke out, growers gained more power as providers of food for America's soldiers, and Ross suspected his antigrower sentiments would no longer be tolerated. So he moved on.

But the next job had a sour taste of its own. He spent four months in community services at an internment camp for Japanese-Americans before quitting. He headed for Cleveland, where he concentrated on finding jobs and housing for Japanese-Americans, some of whom were allowed to leave the camps if they moved east and had jobs and housing guaranteed.

After the war, Ross took his first step down the path that led him to San Jose and his meeting with Chavez. Working for the Chicago-based American Council on Race Relations, he returned to

southern California, then the scene of much anti-Hispanic racial unrest. He can't remember the exact words used by his employer, he says, but "I do know they used everything but 'organize.' That was considered radical at the time."

It was 1946 and Ross, by now married and a father, located his young family in Long Beach. In new communities, he would start off by simply "hanging around" and talking with anyone he could find, sometimes going door to door. "I had to educate people on the spot about what power could do and how to get it."

Ross was itching to take his skills to Los Angeles. Saul Alinsky sought him out, asking him to go to Montana to work with miners who were taking on the copper lords. But Ross persuaded him that the people in the barrios of East L.A. were equally needy, and Alinsky hired him and let him stay put.

Cesar Chavez, in Sal Si Puedes, was at first suspicious of this "gringo" who was looking for him. But for the next nine years, working out of their cars, the two men traveled the valleys of California organizing some twenty community-service organizations. They helped more than 30,000 Hispanics gain U.S. citizenship.

"I took one valley," says Ross, "and Cesar took another."

By the late 1950s, Chavez left to get back to his original aim—organizing farmworkers. Ross stayed on with Alinsky, organizing barrios. Several years later, he was off to work with the Yaqui Indian population of Guadalupe, Arizona. This impoverished village, which included Mexican-Americans as well as Indians, lacked all the basic necessities and, to make matters worse, the two groups of residents didn't get along.

Ross helped them start a community association including both groups in April 1964, and he stayed five

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months. When he left, the local highway was being policed for the first time and was no longer a speedway deathtrap; local streets were paved; playgrounds were built; adult-education classes were started; a doctor was hired for a local medical clinic. And, most important, the town knew how to

handle its problems. By early winter, Guadalupe had its first police officer, its first door-to-door mail delivery, a new municipal water system, and a new clinic for babies.

After the Arizona project, he hooked up again with Cesar Chavez—and spent fifteen years training organizers for

the United Farm Workers. Then, in the early 1980s, Ross turned his attention to the peace movement, where it has been ever since.

Like the process of democracy, he says, organizing requires constant attention. He recalls that, soon after Chavez agreed to work with him, the

young man asked how long the organizing would last. Says Fred Ross with a chuckle, "I had to tell him. I said, 'It's going to last forever.'"

—JOY ANN ZIMMERMAN

(Joy Ann Zimmerman is a staff reporter for the Pacific Sun in San Francisco.)