

February 7, 2013

President Barack Obama
The White House
Washington, DC

Attn: Julie Chavez Rodrigues

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing to join others across the nation in urging you to confer the Presidential Medal of Freedom upon Fred Ross, Sr, whose work as a community and labor organizer knows no parallel in our nation's history.

I first met Fred when I was a leader in the early student movement at UC Berkeley (1957/58, 60/61). He and I drove to Carmel Highlands together on a couple of occasions to spend time with Saul Alinsky, the dean of American community organizing. In those long drives, I had the extraordinary opportunity of learning how Fred viewed people and understood organizing.

When the then-unknown Cesar Chavez first went to Delano in the early 1960s, Fred asked me to help raise funds to keep Cesar going. Fred had trained Cesar, and now wanted to support him in this new endeavor. Asked once about Fred, Chavez replied, "He's my secret weapon."

In 1962, I joined the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. While I spent some time in Mississippi, most of my time was in San Francisco where I was involved in local community organizing work. Here I got my first opportunity to apply Fred Ross lessons on the ground. During this time, I remained in touch with both Saul Alinsky and Fred Ross. Both were generous in the time they made available to me, a then-young organizer.

During my time as SNCC's Northern California "field secretary," I set up the first meetings between SNCC and the National Farm Workers Association. This led to Marshall Ganz' placement with the farmworkers union while he was a SNCC staff member. Both Marshall and I had occasion during this time to meet and discuss organizing with Fred.

It was during this period that the farmworkers union called for its first boycott. Rev. Jim Drake, trained by both Fred Ross, Sr. and Saul Alinsky, and I were its co-coordinators--with Fred an available coach whenever he was called upon. The Schenley Liquor boycott was won, setting the stage for the most massive boycott operation in American labor history. It was Fred Ross, Sr. who Cesar Chavez called upon to train thousands of idealistic young people who responded to the call to act for justice for farm workers.

Not only was the boycott instrumental in winning substantial victories for the farm workers, it was also the most important school for organizers in the country. Today, there is probably not a union in the United States that is doing any organizing that doesn't have on its staff some directly trained by Fred Ross, Sr, or trained by someone he trained.

There was another major contribution Fred made in this period. He was the fieldwork supervisor of a class at Syracuse University taught by Warren Haggstrom. While Saul Alinsky gave occasional lectures to the class, and consulted with Haggstrom, it was Ross who had the hands-on responsibility of training these would-be organizers. A number of them continued in the field, making major contributions to the Welfare Rights Organizations and other groups. One of those people was Bill Pastreich who, in turn, trained Wade Rathke, the founder of ACORN when he developed "The Boston Model" in the Welfare Rights Organization. That, in turn, had an influence on George Wiley, national head of WRO--and important voice for the most marginalized group of people in the nation. (I'm well aware of what finally happened to ACORN. That should not diminish the contribution it made to civic engagement by low-to-moderate income people across the country. Nor should it detract from the fact that ACORN-trained organizers are now also to be found throughout the country in other community and labor organizing endeavors.)

I only know Fred's earlier work from stories. During World War 2, when the country was swept up in anti-Japanese prejudice, Fred was one of the few people to oppose the internment camps that were established for Japanese-American citizens. And he organized against those camps, despite it being a very unpopular cause--especially here in California where Fred was working.

After World War 2, Fred was hired by Saul Alinsky to organize Mexican-Americans in California. He built a powerhouse called Community Service Organization (CSO). Like all his organizing efforts, CSO trained hundreds of people to become effective citizen-leaders, and thousands to become engaged in civic life. While not generally so-acknowledged, CSO is the real beginning of the "Chicano Movement" in the southwest, California and the nation. Its leaders moved into major positions of leadership in politics, labor, government and the nonprofit world. The first Chicano elected to the House of Representatives, Ed Roybal, emerged from the East Los Angeles CSO chapter.

In fact, I'm now working on a book tentatively titled *People Power: Classic Texts of the Saul Alinsky Tradition*, to be published later this year or early next year by Vanderbilt University Press, that features Fred as one of the nation's chief figures in community organizing.

Fred was a small "d" democrat, filled with faith in the capacity of everyday people to govern themselves. He preached and practiced this view. One of my favorite Fred stories is this one he told about an experience with the CSO Board of Directors: The Board voted to do something that ran counter to membership policy. Fred said to the Board chair, "I'm going to take this to the next membership meeting." "You can't do

that," the chair replied, "you work for us." "No," said Fred, "I work for the membership." That was Fred to the core.

The organizer's vocation demands that she or he remain invisible, a behind the scenes worker who isn't interested in recognition or credit. No one more exemplified that in his work than Fred. Indeed, most organizers at one time or other in their lives can't resist the temptation and become spokespersons or otherwise get their names in front of an organization--even knowing that they've parted from what is demanded of them. I know, I've succumbed. Fred was as close to perfect on this score as is humanly possible.

Throughout his life Fred stayed close to what was going on "on the ground." While many organizers left the work and became teachers, consultants, writers, lecturers, workshop leaders, labor organizers and leaders, politicians or found another way to continue acting on their ideals, Fred never left his original calling: to shift everyday people from a position of being acted upon by forces beyond their control to becoming agents in their own destinies.

When I was at the 50th anniversary celebration of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's founding, Attorney General Eric Holder told the assembled veterans of the Deep South civil rights movement, "We (meaning the Obama Administration) wouldn't be where we are today if you were not where you were then." He could with equal validity address an assembly of Fred Ross' trainees, and the generations of organizers they trained, and say to them, "We would not be where we are today if it were not for what you did in the past 60 years."

Fred Ross, Sr deserves the Presidential Medal of Freedom both for the general contribution he made to American democracy and for the specific contribution he made to the election of Barack Obama.

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Mike

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