

Thursday March 14, 2013

Dear Mr. President Obama,

As our first community organizer President who knows the value of empowering our communities, I urge you to confer the Presidential Medal of Freedom upon Fred Ross Senior for his powerful legacy of community organizing. His legacy has empowered and freed not just entire populations and communities from disenfranchisement around our great nation, but the hearts and minds of so many of our women and men who believe in the freedom the United States represents.

I don't consider myself a dangerous criminal of any sort but I am a known social arsonist. The organizer [axiom from Fred. Ross Sr.](#) explains, "A good organizer is a social arsonist who goes around setting people on fire." Remember the cautionary [children's story](#) about the full circle effect of giving a mouse a cookie? A similar unstoppable danger lies within giving a social arsonist your ear – they will ask you what is written upon your heart's walls and ignite a passion within you to a point where you have to do something about it and before you know it, you're organizing and leading your community. Fred Ross Jr. caught my ear fresh out of college and connected me to a legacy of powerful personal stories, organizing victories, and his own personal story and legacy of his father, Fred Ross Senior.

I first met Fred Ross Jr. in a 2008 organizer training for a campaign to promote renewable energy and raise the RPS standard in California. I was there for young ideals of saving the environment but what I walked away with after those two days with Fred was a visceral connection to the potential I had always felt in myself – the potential to create tangible, sustainable, and positive change in my community and beyond. Fred and Dolores Huerta shared their personal stories, the organizer story, the world as it is, the world as it should be, and the plan to win. Like a good book that never leaves your hands, I eagerly soaked up their enthusiasm, wisdom, and confidence in me and my fellow organizers as future organizers of their ilk. As another axiom from Fred Ross Senior sums up: "You don't develop new leaders; you push people into taking action by refusing to do it yourself. You are then providing them the opportunity to become aware of their own capabilities". Dolores, Fred, and the legacy of Fred Ross Senior provided me with the tools to realize my own teleological potential.

I've been a paid social arsonist for five years now, setting people on fire from – training and providing opportunities for organizers to address economic injustice by [empowering the Latino](#)

[community](#) of Southern California to pursue higher education – to – organizing grassroots and media [campaigns against the coal industry](#) because of its negative health effects on low income minority communities – to – founding and growing a local [feminist democratic club](#) to fight the disenfranchisement of women both within the party and beyond – to – organizing a coalition of volunteers and groups to empower the embattled Latino community of Southern Arizona during the 2012 general election with the likes of now Senator Jeff Flake and Sherriff Joe Arpaio. The organizer values of inclusion, equality, and diversity I've learned permeate my every action just as powerfully as inspiration and ambition connect me to the social arsonists I had the honor of learning and working with: *Dolores Huerta*, *Fred Ross Jr.*, and the unyielding legacy of *Fred Ross Sr.* In Arizona we were able to keep that legacy alive and shape the conversation to give voice to those who felt so hated, underrepresented, and neglected in their own communities. We held an organizer training for community members, groups, and leaders and were able to build an infrastructure of support and movement to turn out Latino voters and volunteers who may have otherwise suffered from the inertia of feeling powerless.

What I learned through this and every organizer training, cause, or movement I've been a part of is how powerful the personal story is – my story, each person's story, and the organizer story. To win the hearts and minds of people, forget the dry facts and statistics; tell them the stories that won you to the cause – another axiom from Fred Ross Sr. I hold dearly. It's the little things like these axioms and this letter among many you'll receive that count. With that, I leave you with one final axiom: "Little Things –If you are able to achieve anything big in life, it's because you paid attention to the "little" things." I know you have and will continue to do so, si se puede!

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Warmest regards,

Kelly Fong Rivas
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