

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

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MICHAEL YAKI
COMMISSIONER

February 28, 2013

Julie C. Rodriguez
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Ms. Rodriguez,

I write to you in my individual capacity as a Commissioner serving on the eight-member U.S. Commission on Civil Rights to support the request of the Civil Rights community that President Obama consider bestowing a Presidential Medal of Freedom to Fred Ross Sr., an individual who devoted his not only to helping others, but giving the disempowered the tools to organize and take control of their lives and their communities.

I was fortunate to have known Fred Ross Sr. in the latter stages of his life, during a time when people began truly appreciating the legacy he had created. I watched as people like Cesar Chavez and Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi made pilgrimages to his bedside to talk, to reminisce, and to honor his life.

His contributions to the Cesar Chavez and the entire United Farm Worker movement cannot be underestimated. His training of the young Chavez in the tools of community organizing and empowerment, and his own involvement with the then-nascent UFW, helped create a movement that led to the passage of landmark laws protecting the rights and improving the conditions of farmworkers throughout California and beyond.

But Fred Ross Sr.'s roots in social justice extend far further back than his milestone victories in the 1970s for the UFW. Fred Ross Sr. started out as a son of the New Deal, working to help Dust Bowlers adjust to life in Migratory Labor Camps in California run by the Department of Agriculture. Appalled by the segregation rampant in those camps, he openly agitated to end the practice and to provide self-governance for the individuals in the camps.

Later, during the War, his commitment to end racism and serve the ends of justice took him to the euphemistically-named War Relocation Authority, an entity created to help Americans of Japanese descent who had been forcibly torn from their homes in the hysteria following Pearl Harbor and shipped to "internment" camps across the country. He helped them to transition out of the camps, into new communities, new jobs, and actively fought the anti-Japanese sentiment that pervaded many communities during a time when we were still at war with Japan, including in my home town of San Francisco.

NOMINATION OF FRED ROSS SR.

I could go on and on, but you will be and have heard from many others across the country whose lives and communities were touched by the organizing genius and social justice passion of Fred Ross Sr.

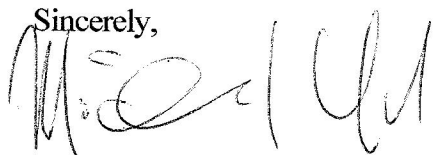
If I may, I wish to add a personal note that touches upon recent topics. As a member of the United States Commission on Civil Rights for the past 8 years, I have borne witness to far too many patently racist, insensitive, and wholly inappropriate acts and dialogue, all from individuals of high education and station in life. When I hear a member of the Supreme Court of the United States recently speak of "racial entitlements," I cannot help but wonder what Fred Ross Sr. would have thought of such a statement.

Fred Ross Sr. fought for racial justice. He fought for racial equality. He believed that all men and women are created equal, but that some men and women, because of circumstance of birth, of color, of religion, of economic circumstance, are not provided equal opportunities to succeed and be part of this great nation. Fred Ross Sr. was white. He did not share a culture with the Japanese Americans he assisted. He did not share a religion or ethnicity with the Latino farm workers he organized. But he believed, to the core of his being, that being fair to others and treating others fairly was not a handout, that being recognized as living, breathing people who, even if living in a barrio, had the same hopes and dreams of aspirations of someone living in Wall Street was not an entitlement. But rather than agonize at such outrageous statements of acts by ignorant so-called leaders, he helped people organize. He helped people learn to take control of their lives, of their constitutional and unalienable rights, to take back and organize their power. And, in so doing, become productive, contributing, and committed members of these United States.

If that isn't what the Presidential Medal of Freedom is for, I don't know what is.

Thank you for your consideration of Fred Ross Sr. for a Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Sincerely,



MICHAEL YAKI

Commissioner

United States Commission on Civil Rights