

## GUEST OPINION

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# Organizer Fred Ross, a Hero for the Underdogs

By Dick Meister

For more than a half-century, Fred Ross was among the most influential, skilled, dedicated and successful of the community organizers who have done so much for the underdogs of U.S. society.

Ross was tall and lean, a quiet man of fierce commitment. Yet when he died in California last fall at age 82, little was written about his passing. Most newspaper readers probably never heard of him.

That is exactly how Fred Ross wanted it. He saw his job as training others to assume leadership and receive the recognition.

Train them he did, hundreds of them, including farmworker leader César Chávez.

Chávez was a typical Ross student — a poor, inexperienced member of an oppressed group willing to mobilize others to stand up to their oppressors.

"Fred did such a good job of explaining how poor people could build power I could taste it," Chávez recalls today.

Chávez was among the Mexican Americans living in California's *barrios* in the 1950s whom Ross helped form political blocs. Within just a few years, the small organizations formed by the residents of those *barrios* joined into a potent statewide group, the Community Services Organization headed by Chávez.

A few years later, Chávez founded what became the United Farm Workers union. It was the country's first effective farmworker organization precisely because it was built from the ground up by Chávez and other farmworkers in accord with Ross' principles, relying heavily on such non-violent tactics as the boycott.

After working his way through the University of Southern California in 1936, Ross planned to be a classroom teacher, but he could find no teaching jobs in that dark year during the Great Depression. So he took other public work, eventually managing the federal migratory labor camp near Bakersfield, Calif., that novelist John Steinbeck used as the model for the camp that played a central role in "The Grapes of Wrath."

Fiction though it was, Steinbeck's account was accurate. Camp conditions were deplorable. So were those imposed on the migrants by the local growers. But, thanks to young Ross, the migrants were able to organize themselves to win better living and working conditions.

Ross had found his life's work. He would become a full-time organizer — "a social arsonist who goes around setting people on fire," he often said.

He left the migrant camp to work on the West Coast with Japanese Americans who were herded into internment camps during the World War II. He helped many win release by finding them jobs in the manpower-short factories in the Midwest, producing vital war materials.

After the war, he returned to Southern California to help blacks and Mexican Americans fight housing and school segregation. They also fought effectively against police brutality and elected Los Angeles' first Hispanic city councilman, Edward Roybal.

Ross worked in Arizona, too, helping Yaqui Indians get sewers, paved streets, medical facilities and other basic needs that had been denied their communities.

His most ambitious and probably most satisfying work came during his 15 years of training hundreds of organizers and negotiators for the United Farm Workers. Those he trained were inexperienced and long-oppressed rank-and-file members.

Ross kept at it for virtually the rest of his life — organizing grass-roots campaigns for liberal politicians; joining his son, Fred Jr., now a highly regarded organizer himself, in the national campaigns against U.S. policies in Central America; working with anti-nuclear and peace groups.

It was not until four years ago, when Alzheimer's Disease struck, that he finally stopped.

Fred Ross was an organizer's organizer, a trailblazer, a pioneer. He was — and he remains — a vital model for those seeking to empower the powerless and to truly reform, if not perfect, this imperfect society.

"Fred fought more fights and trained more organizers and planted more seeds of righteous indignation against social injustice than anyone we're ever likely to see again," says former UFW general counsel Jerry Cohen.

"He was a giant," says filmmaker, playwright and former UFW activist Luis Valdez. "He was an uncommon common man."

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