

Larry Tramutola 1971–1981

I first met Fred Ross in Salinas, the “lettuce capital of the world,” during the lettuce strike in 1970. Ross had retired from a successful career as a community organizer. But Cesar had asked him to come to Salinas to help organize and train the United Farm Workers’ staff. The UFW was beginning a nationwide boycott of lettuce and the union planned to send its members and its staff to cities across the country to raise awareness of the farmworkers’ struggle and to build support for the UFW’s lettuce boycott.

I had recently graduated from Stanford and was volunteering at the San Mateo Legal Aid office, hoping to get some first-hand knowledge of the law before applying to law school.

I arrived in Salinas about mid-morning on a Saturday. I had brought a load of donated food to the strikers and their families. After I drove up and parked my VW “squareback” in the alley behind the UFW’s office, a half-dozen farmworker women wearing red bandanas came out of the UFW office and helped unload the boxes of canned goods and food from my car. Their children ran in and out of the office, while nearby, several small groups of men, laughing and arguing in Spanish, stood watching us as we came inside.

A meeting was being held in the back corner of the storefront office. The office was cavernous, perhaps a quiet neighborhood grocery store in a former life. But now there was an atmosphere of activity and hustle inside. People were everywhere, standing in groups or sitting in the back on old, battered folding chairs.

I immediately noticed Fred. He was leaning against a wall, his arms folded around a spiral notebook. He seemed totally out of place. Unlike the farmworkers, who were mostly in their 20s and 30s, Fred was in his 60s. He was tall and lean, with the chiseled looks of an aging Hollywood film star. He was calm and focused, seemingly unaware of the hum of activity in other parts of the large hall. He listened intently as each person, one by one, stood up to give their progress report on the strike. I asked the person next to me, “Who’s the old guy?”

Immediately he replied: “Oh that’s Fred Ross. He found and trained Cesar years ago. He’s one of the few Anglos that Cesar trusts. He taught Cesar everything about organizing.”

Later that evening, quite by chance, I ran into Fred at a Fosters Freeze in town. (I learned later that Fred had a weakness for vanilla shakes.) I introduced myself, said that I had come down for the day to bring food to the strikers and I had seen him at the UFW office earlier in the day. We spoke a few minutes and I eventually asked him, “What does it take to be an organizer?”

He looked at me over his glasses and replied, “Time, discipline, and hard work. You interested?”

“I might be,” I said, and he grabbed a stub of a pencil from the pocket of his khaki shirt, scribbled down his name and his San Francisco phone number, telling me, “If you are interested, give me a call.” But he left me with a warning of the hard road ahead: “Most don't have it in them to be any good, though,” he said as he walked away.

Despite his less-than-enthusiastic encouragement, I called him on the phone a few days later. I reintroduced myself and told him I had heard that the union needed help and that I wanted to learn more. He said he couldn't see me immediately, since he was busy working on a book about Cesar's early organizing days, but he invited me to his house the next day.

What Do You Believe in?

When I arrived at his small, sparsely furnished home in the Bernal Heights area in the south end of San Francisco, what struck me at once were the piles of books and yellow notepads, filled with almost illegible writing, scattered around his living room. His desk was piled with stacks of tapes for his portable recorder, and classical music was playing on his ancient record player. We talked for several hours. He spoke thoughtfully and quietly about social justice and activism.

He told stories of organizing Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles in the 1950s and running the first successful campaign to elect a Mexican-American to the L.A. City Council. He talked about the voter registration campaigns he had conducted across the state to increase the political power of minorities. He provided specifics on how the UFW was trying to improve the lives of farmworkers and rattled off statistics about the low life expectancy of farmworkers and told stories of people caught in poverty who had no hope for the future unless they organized.

His eyes flashed with anger when he talked about police brutality against farmworkers. His voice cracked with emotion when he described babies born with deformities due to the use of toxic pesticides.

I listened, stunned with his knowledge and his passion and intrigued as he described his life and successes. After a while he stopped talking about himself and his work and began probing me with his piercing, penetrating gaze and words. “Why are you interested in organizing?” he asked.

“Organizing,” he said, “is not for everybody and if you want to be successful you have to know *why* you are doing it. If you are not committed to something more important than yourself, you'll never be successful.”

“Before we talk about organizing,” he said, “let's talk about you. What do *you* believe in?”

I wasn't prepared for this question. I had hoped to talk about the techniques of organizing and I wanted to hear more stories of how he had organized people. Fred wanted to talk about the “why” of organizing.

I rambled a bit about social justice, civil rights, and the anti-war movement. I talked about my own family and how my grandfather had suffered discrimination when he immigrated to the U.S., and that my family had actually changed our name to blend in. I told him that I wasn't interested in a normal career and that I wanted to make a difference with my life, but I had no idea where to start or what I could do.

Fred said that he had met many people like me who wanted to make a difference, but they lacked the commitment. "Organizing" he said, "is a tough career, and if you can't articulate your own motivation you will have a hard time organizing others."

"I like your honesty," he said, "and the simple fact that you came to see me may mean that you are serious. When can you start work? We need people immediately."

"I'm available to help for a few months," I told him. I had no idea at the time that I would eventually stay with the union for 11 years, and the lessons I would learn from him and from others would provide the foundation for a successful career in organizing.

I began learning about organizing in his modest and cluttered house in San Francisco. I sat on his floor as he showed me photographs of farm labor camps that could have been from a third-world country rather than from areas a few miles south of San Francisco. He showed pictures of himself as a young man celebrating a successful citizenship drive among Mexican immigrants. Each picture he showed told a story of a successful organizing drive.

He talked about how he trained people to conduct voter registration drives to increase minority participation in elections so that elected officials would pay attention to minority communities. He talked about all the things that were accomplished—better housing, better schools, improved health care—when people organized themselves. Fred believed that politicians rarely did something worthwhile on their own, and that people had to organize themselves if they wanted to improve their communities.

I asked Fred if there was anything written about organizing. "Nothing any good, that's why I'm writing it." (Unfortunately, he never finished his book.) So with no job description, no workbook, no manual, I began my "training." "Being an organizer takes a tremendous amount of commitment and discipline," he told me, adding that during his almost 30 years as an organizer, he had found very few people who had the combination of commitment and discipline to be successful, but he was always looking. That was one of the reasons he was writing a book about Chavez's early days organizing the union—to show what Chavez had done to achieve this success.

Since nothing had been written on how to organize, my "learn as you go" training on the job began. My first task was to build community support in Santa Clara County from San Jose to Palo Alto for the union's boycott. I quickly learned that there were no easy steps to

follow. My staff consisted of one—me. I was given a few names of local people who had sent money to the union to support the strike, and from these few contacts I was asked to build a small army of people who would contribute financially to the union and support the boycott. My goal was to recruit people to volunteer each week to pass out leaflets about the boycott at grocery stores throughout the county. “The pay is \$10 a week,” Fred told me, “and you get \$100 a month for your rent if you stay more than a month.” Luckily, I already had my own car. “The union will reimburse you for gas,” Fred said. “Keep your receipts.”

“What about food?” I asked.

“That’s what the 10 bucks is for. A good organizer will find others to feed him,” Fred replied.

Naïvely, I started out thinking that all I had to do was share my enthusiasm for the cause and people would quickly contribute or volunteer. However, I soon found the task of organizing much harder than I had expected. I went to Catholic churches, to schools and unions, and got names of potential supporters. But many of the people I called to help me pass out leaflets in front of stores just didn’t show up, and I soon ran out of names to call. I phoned Fred frustrated and looking for answers. “I’m just not having a lot of success,” I told him.

Fred came right to the point: “Of course not. It’s hard work and you obviously don’t know what you’re doing. To be successful you have to sting people into action. You have to repeatedly prod them to get off their butts.”

Fred said I needed to organize myself before I could organize others. When I met him at his house in Bernal Heights a few days later, he had covered his living room wall with a long sheet of butcher paper. On it he had drawn vertical lines creating 14 columns on which he had marked the days of the next two weeks starting with Sunday through Saturday.

Then he proceeded with his lesson of how to be organized and disciplined. Pointing to the chart and handing me a colored marker, he told me, “Write down everything you have to do each day. Who are you meeting Monday?”

I went over to the butcher paper and wrote down the names and times of the three people I was supposed to meet that day.

Fred continued. “OK, now when are you calling these people to remind them that you are coming to see them?”

Remind them I was coming to see them? “I hadn’t thought of that,” I told Fred.

“Well, write that down,” he stated firmly. “Reminding is the essence of organizing.”

He went over to the butcher paper and wrote in the Sunday column: “Make reminder calls to...” Then he listed the names and phone numbers of the people I was to visit the following Monday.

The lesson continued. “What time are you calling them?” he asked, and before I could answer he instructed me: “Now write down the time.” I did.

But he wasn’t through with me yet. “OK, now on Monday before you meet with them, you need to call them again, right?” Fred asked me.

I just nodded quietly while privately thinking that all this reminding and writing down was a bit of overkill. It was only weeks later that I came to understand that it is these details, and the discipline to put them into practice, that are absolutely essential to good organizing. At the time, though, I hadn’t learned that for myself and I certainly didn’t want to challenge Fred, so I said nothing.

Fred went on. “Good. Now write on the butcher paper the time that you plan to call them, so you don’t forget. It is always good to call people right before you visit them, so you don’t waste time if they are not there.”

“And by the way,” he continued, “while you are at the house of one of the people on your list, ask if you can use their phone to call your next appointment. That way they’ll see how serious you are.”

The writing process went on for over two hours, until the butcher paper was covered with notes and reminders. Every hour of the day was accounted for, even sleeping and eating. Fred instructed me, “Estimate how much time you need for each activity—even sleep—and then put an estimated time next to it.”

When we were finished, he told me, “Now copy everything down in your own notebook, so you have a copy of the schedule, and call me each night at 9 p.m. sharp and report what you have accomplished that day.”

As I took out my notebook and began copying, I realized there were no days off. While the weekdays and evenings were devoted to calling and meeting with people, Friday afternoons and Saturdays were for picketing and leafleting. Sundays were set aside for visiting churches during the day and calling volunteers in the evening, since Sunday evening, I learned, was the best time to call because people were usually home. I even wrote down the times when I was supposed to call Fred each day. “TALK to FRED from 9–11 P.M.,” I wrote in big bold letters on each day of the week.

I followed Fred’s advice as best I could. Reminding people became essential to achieving success. To do it took discipline and self-organization. Sometimes I didn’t call people to

remind them because I ran out of time or was doing something else and forgot. When that happened, I usually paid the price for my lack of discipline. Sometimes the person wasn't at home when I arrived at their house to meet with them, or even if they were there, they came to the door and said they couldn't meet with me.

I also called Fred each night without fail, as he had instructed, though the phone call was torture, because he would grill me mercilessly about what I had done. If I was 15 minutes late phoning him, he would call me. "We are supposed to talk everyday at 9, not 9:15!"

We started every call with what I had accomplished during the day. He peppered me with probing questions that demanded thoughtful answers and accountability: "Why did you do that? What did you say when he said that?" The interrogation went on for two hours and often longer, as I had to report and relive my successes and failures of the day. Fred asked me one question after another, and unless I was prepared to simply hang up and walk away from what I was doing, there was no escape or relief. But I endured the torment, partly out of pride and partly because I knew Fred was teaching me invaluable lessons about the importance of follow-through and disciplined work. "There are no short cuts," Fred told me.

And so I persevered, through week after week of this routine. Why he decided that I was worth taking the time to train I never knew. I did know that the hands-on training I was receiving was incredible, even if I was exhausted by the long 14- to 16-hour days spent trying to meet people, inspire them to participate in picketing or leafleting, and making my reminder calls so they would show up for meetings or weekend activities. I learned to make appointments with people around dinnertime and to graciously accept offers of food. I was learning, though mostly I felt raw from Fred's nightly "inquisition" when he sought to uncover every short cut and mistake I had made during the day. Not only did he call my attention to each flaw, but my admitting I had made a mistake wasn't enough for him. No, he wanted to know why and what I had learned from that failure.

For instance, after I told him about something I had done wrong, he would ask in an exasperated tone, "Well, *why* did you do that?" When volunteers who had promised to come to help pass out leaflets didn't show up, he would say, "I've *told* you that you need to remind people to come. When you are not successful organizing *you* need to take the responsibility. It is not their fault they didn't show up. It's *yours*. You either didn't do a good enough job inspiring them, or you didn't follow up and let them off the hook. Either way it's your fault."

And then he would give me suggestions in the form of questions on what to do to follow up with the no-shows to get them to show up the next time. Fred's suggestions were like techniques for getting an escaped fish back on the hook. He would ask me, "Did you call them when they didn't show up? Did you tell them that they were letting you down and even more importantly, that they were letting the farmworkers down?"

Fred considered organizing the highest form of community activism. “You have to do it right,” he told me, “If you don’t, you’ll always be blaming something or someone else. Excuses are for failures, and you don’t want to fail. Do absolutely everything you can to keep from failing.”

So for six months, day after day, with no days off, I followed Fred’s advice, doing everything he told me. As soon as he felt I had accomplished a task successfully, he demanded more of me. Once I began to successfully organize the one-on-one meetings with potential supporters, he taught me about “house meetings,” a more efficient and effective way of reaching people than one-on-one meetings, but also more difficult to organize. A house meeting is the opportunity of speaking to 14 to 20 people per night instead of just the two or three you can meet one-on-one. They are much harder to set up because they involve getting someone to host a meeting at their house and getting *that* person to make sure people attend.

Fred explained how to record responses whenever I talked with people—whether in one-on-one meetings or house meetings or for anything else—just like an anthropologist has to keep careful field notes. He showed me how to develop my own call sheets, which involved keeping careful handwritten or typed lists of names, phone numbers, and what I said each time I talked to them. (Remember: we were in the “pre-computer” age back then.)

He stressed the importance of telling stories, not fictional stories, but real stories about everyday people and their lives and dreams. “You want to tell stories that illustrate the truth in human terms about poverty, hopelessness, exploitation, and racism. You want to tell stories that people can relate to, that they can sympathize and empathize with, so they can put themselves in the shoes of others and feel for them. Stories can inspire people to do something with their own lives to help others.”

But most important, Fred’s repeated statements, reminders, and cautions about what to do taught me about discipline. Listen to his litany, repeated again and again:

“Don’t assume anything.”

“Take responsibility.”

“You have to remind people. Reminding people is the essence of organizing.”

“Failure is not the result of others not doing things. It is the result of you not organizing correctly.”

“Being an organizer requires you to work hours other people don’t. That means weekends and evenings. If you are unwilling to do that, you can’t be an organizer.”

“There are usually two ways to do things, the easy way and the hard way. The hard way is usually best.”

After a while, his admonitions began to sear firmly into my brain. Eventually, after several months I began to hear a few words of praise and encouragement as well. Along with the criticisms and admonitions, Fred began to say things like “Good job.” “Hmmm, I guess you have been paying attention.” The praise, which had been so rare in the first few months, now became regular, and his encouragement motivated me to work even harder.

I began recruiting other people who wanted to work for the UFW. I went to college campuses and recruited students to take leaves of absence or to take a semester off. I asked schoolteachers to work over the summer and nuns to ask permission from their orders to help. All I could promise them was the \$10 a week the UFW offered its organizers, but they were eager to learn, just as I had learned from Fred. In my training sessions with them I did my best to include the same kind of intense questions and accountability, which Fred had used to grill me. And though I never was as good or as perceptive as Fred, I tried to model my training after his and to give them the best training I could.

I soon found his lessons began to pay off, and my staff grew to three, then six, then 12. While some left after a few weeks or a few months, unable to handle the personal commitment or discipline, many stayed on, and they became excellent, committed organizers.

Over the years Fred and I became good friends, but he was always the teacher and I remained the student. I often called him to ask questions and obtain his insightful advice. I learned to acknowledge my shortcomings and to be forthright about my failures.

“Failure” he said, “is part of the learning process. Learn from your mistakes and don’t make them again. In organizing, success is built one person at a time one day at a time. The first person you must organize is yourself. You must know what you believe in and you must be committed to making a difference. If you can do those things, you will change the world.”