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At 72, Olive Dickason is fighting forced retirement.

Métis heritage fuelled passion for history

Olive Dickason got PhD at 57

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EDMONTON — Part of Olive Dickason's passion for native history stems from her Métis heritage, on her mother's side, which she discovered only in her mid-20s.

"It was a real stigma" to admit to native ancestry, she said, repositioning a necklace of turquoise stones.

"Your dominant society really undervalued the native population."

Dickason, a University of Alberta history professor, has tried to change that.

She returned to school at age 49 after a 24-year career in journalism which included reporting and editing jobs at *The Gazette* and *Globe and Mail*.

She got her bachelor's degree in history and announced she would write her master's thesis on Indian history.

"The reaction of the authorities was to tell me that there was no Indian history."

Dickason got her MA and went on to write a doctoral thesis on the subject, earning a PhD when she was 57. She has since published three books.

Dickason's eyes are wide with passion behind large glasses, and her tiny frame almost pops from her chair with energy as she speaks about her latest book, *Canada's First Nations*.

"There wasn't a single exploratory tour that went into the interior of Canada without an Indian guide,"

she says.

"You would never get that when you read your early histories of the fur trade."

The ignorance of Indians' role in Canadian history is a typical oversight of white society, she said, and it extends to the education native children have received.

Using Dick and Jane stories to teach native children in Canada's North to cross a street at a green light is absurd, Dickason said.

"Up in the North, there wasn't a road within three days' travel."

The 72-year-old Dickason returns to part-time teaching this fall at the University of Alberta, but it's uncertain whether she will last the year.

The Supreme Court of Canada is deciding on a challenge she has made to Alberta's mandatory-retirement law, which Dickason has been fighting since she turned 65.

She defends what she says is her right to work as long as she chooses.

"Your great historians and philosophers are not your young pups that come in. It's the ones who have had time to think about things," she says.

"Getting your PhD is an expensive process," in money and time. "Then you emerge with a nice shining PhD and you're not allowed to work?"

The University of Alberta has already informed her and other 65-plus professors that the Supreme Court decision — expected sometime during the coming school year — will take effect immediately.