

NATIVE ARTS FOUNDATION AWARDS

Métis historian won't slow down

By Julia Elliott
Citizen staff writer

She took a forced retirement case to the Supreme Court of Canada and lost. But, five years later, at 76, Olive Dickason, a world-renowned Métis historian, is nowhere near slowing down.

"I'm a gopher for information," she says and shows six walls in her modest Centretown apartment packed with books, floor to ceiling.

Dickason hopes to join the University of Ottawa as an adjunct professor of history. She's working on a book that will trace early relationships of Europeans with aboriginal peoples in North America and Mexico. And she's one of 14 recipients of a National Aboriginal Achievement award for her work in detailing the part Aboriginal People played in the development of Canada.

John Kim Bell, the award's founder, says her groundbreaking book, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples*, has helped to ensure that persons of First Nations, Métis and Inuit heritage are "fully appreciated in sound academic studies," playing a prominent part in Canada's history.

When Dickason's family was growing up in the bush in northern Manitoba, her mother, a former teacher, hammered into her that education was key. Dickason took her advice and fought to keep educating others.

In 1992, she lost a seven-year battle against forced retirement from the University of Alberta. She was 55 when she joined the school's history department in 1975 after graduating with a master's degree in Canadian history from the University of Ottawa three years earlier. When Dickason turned 65, she was expected to leave the university quietly.

She didn't. She fought retirement in the courts. The Human Rights Commission paid most of her legal bills. Her case: Retirement should be flexible, based on the individual.

"In your career and your working life, you are judged by your performance, how you do and how you get along," she said. "Then, suddenly, at the age of 65, it doesn't matter whether



— Pat McGrath, Citizen

Olive Dickason is 76, but she still wants to teach even after losing a seven-year court battle over forced retirement from the University of Alberta

you're good, bad or indifferent; your performance doesn't matter two hoots. All of a sudden, a new rule applies.

"Some people are not functioning at the age of 25, and some people are functioning extremely well at 75."

Dickason came to the academic world late in life.

Worked as reporter

From 1944 to 1967, she worked as a reporter for the *Regina Leader-Post*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, *The Gazette* and, finally, *The Globe and Mail*.

People said she was crazy to leave a good job as the *Globe's* women's editor, but Dickason thought long-term. She had raised three children on her own, they were able to look after themselves, and she thought — with "one life to live" — it was time for a new adventure.

As a journalist, "you're at the nub of

Facts

What: The Canadian Native Arts Foundation is honoring 14 aboriginal people of First Nations, Métis and Inuit ancestry for outstanding career achievements.

Recipients: Olive Dickason, who receives a lifetime achievement award; Toronto-based actor Graham Greene; Nova Scotia poet Rita Joe; and Vancouver-based kidney transplant specialist Dr. Martin Gale McLoughlin.

what's happening in the world, but it's a young person's game," she said.

Going back to school was "like being reborn again. It was a wonderful experience."

While studying, Dickason decided to teach aboriginal history and help correct a prevalent notion in the late 1960s that first peoples were savages who had no significant part to play in the country's development.

"In the '60s and '70s, history books might devote one chapter to the role of aboriginals," said Jan Grabowski, a history professor at the University of Ottawa. Dickason was a powerful voice, saying you couldn't study Canadian society without "sufficient attention" given to aboriginals.

When Dickason was growing up, her family — one sister, an English father and a French-Canadian Métis mother — lived off the land, growing vegetables and trading furs for staples such as flour and tea.

Dickason got a Grade 10 education through correspondence courses and, by chance, met an unorthodox Roman Catholic priest who was running Notre Dame College, a school for disadvantaged students near Regina. Father Athol Murray encouraged Dickason to continue her education and let her study at the school without charge. She graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in 1943.

Says Dickason, a member of the Order of Canada: "I've been lucky all my life, taking advantage of opportunities when they present themselves."