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Longtime professor of law at U. to retire

Edwin B. Firmage: He still plans to stay active in civil and human rights issues after 39 years of teaching

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Edwin B. Firmage has been called a peace activist, a political observer and a liberal Democrat.

But the monikers the great-great grandson of Brigham Young takes the most pride in include teacher, defender of civil liberties and advocate of human rights.

His formal teaching career, though, is nearing its end. On Jan. 1, Firmage will retire after 39 years as a professor of constitutional and international law at the University of Utah's S.J. Quinney College of Law.

"A lot of people have been encouraging me to do it for some time," Firmage joked Friday during a telephone interview from southern Utah, where he is visiting his daughter. The 70-year-old native Utahn has faced a series of health problems, including cancer and a heart attack.

Firmage will put away the law books next year, but he will remain active in civil and human rights issues. He is working with Hopi, Navajo and Piute tribes on what he calls "survival issues." He also plans to write three books.

Ted Wilson, a former Salt Lake City mayor and longtime director of the U.'s Hinckley Institute of Politics, on Friday called Firmage "one of the true intellectuals in our community."

He said Firmage took a brave position against the proposed MX missile project in 1981 and, along with a few others, was instrumental in getting the LDS Church to derail Congress' plan to put MX missiles in Utah's desert 20 years ago.

A statement by the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on May 5, 1981, detailed the church's concerns. President Spencer W. Kimball and others talked about Utah becoming a first-strike target for a nuclear attack and how the presence of the MX missiles threatened the people and ecology of Utah and Nevada.

The church's statement "literally" killed MX, Firmage said.

In 1978, Firmage ran unsuccessfully for Congress on the Utah Democratic ticket. He lost to Republican Dan Marriott.

"It's tough being a Democrat in Utah," he said.

Edwin Firmage Jr. on Friday recalled his father often saying, "The law can only take you so far; you need to touch people's hearts."

"A lot of his teaching and activities have been directed at adding that dimension to the studies that students' have at the law school," Firmage Jr. said.

U. law school dean Scott Matheson Jr. said Firmage has taught generations of students and is well regarded, not only for his excellent teaching, but also for his commitment to human rights.

In 1991, Firmage received the Rosenblatt Prize for Excellence, the highest academic award given by the U. That same year, he received the Turner-Fairbourn Award from the Holladay United Church of Christ and the Murray and Salt Lake Rotary clubs, for significant contributions to peace and justice.

Firmage served as a White House Fellow on the staff of Vice President Hubert Humphrey, with responsibilities for civil rights. In that capacity, he worked with then-NAACP head Roy Wilkins and civil-rights

leader Martin Luther King Jr.

He also served as a United Nations visiting scholar and attended the sessions of the U.N.'s General Assembly in New York and arms-control negotiations in Geneva, Switzerland in the early 1970s.