When retired physicist James Hurlbut (MA ‘49, liberal arts) moved to Denver from Wisconsin with his wife in 1946, he had no idea what the future held for him out west. What awaited him was a long career as a successful nuclear physicist, a family business, spending countless volunteer hours at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science and even learning to play jazz.

Hurlbut had served as a naval pilot after graduating from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in physics, but when he moved to Denver, he found it difficult to find full time work. Since he was in the navy and could get funding for further education on the G.I. Bill, Hurlbut decided to return to school for a masters of liberal arts (emphasis in physics) at the University of Denver.

Upon graduating, Hurlbut worked as a teacher at Englewood High School for two years. However, “I wasn’t using my physics enough, so I got a job with the Lowry Air Force base and worked on writing a 19-week radar course,” he said. Hurlbut taught the entire first class and realized how he could tie his physics knowledge with his naval pilot experience.

Hurlbut left the school and went to work at the now-defunct Denver Research Institute (DRI) at DU, stationed at Mount Evans.

“We had a contract with the Air Force, so we set up on top of Mount Evans and tried out various schemes to make radio compasses work at high altitudes, which was very complicated,” Hurlbut explained. “At the time, the U.S. military was having trouble with B-52s trying to fly high with atomic bombs around the edges of Russia, because of this radio compass issue.”

Hurlbut worked at the Institute for three years, and became part of the atomic bomb construction in the U.S. His team set off three atomic bombs in Nevada.

“We took fast measurements for blasts with instruments placed atop a 300-foot tower directly over the blast,” he said. While the instruments were blown up, Hurlbut would retrieve what was left 12 hours later. “It was certainly the most memorable part of my experience with DU, and certainly the best way I was able to combine my naval experience with physics expertise!”

Upon returning from Nevada to Denver, the DRI was doing reorganization and no longer had a position for him, so he went into business selling high tech electronic equipment to labs around nuclear facilities. This became what is now a national electronics company, J.F. Hurlbut Co.,
currently run by his son Dave. The company has offices in Golden and Phoenix and also sells equipment in New Mexico, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana.

In addition to his work as a successful physicist and businessman, Hurlbut has found time to volunteer at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, where he is the Associate Curator of Microminerals and has logged over 10,000 hours of volunteer work. Along with this, his collection of 30,000 microdiamonds, fossils and minerals led him to induction into the Microminerals Hall of Fame.

Hurlbut, now 93, still travels nationwide with his collections; in February he took a display down to the Tucson Gem and Mineral show and gave a talk; and in July, he is going to Tulsa for another event.

“Minerals were my hobby, and became an enormous part of my career and my life today,” he said.

Hurlbut continues to be involved with DU today, but on a different end of the liberal arts spectrum: as a jazz musician. Hurlbut took classes at the Lamont School of Music and learned how to play clarinet.

“I still go to all of DU’s jazz concerts, and am currently arranging to donate my entire record collection to the school,” he said. He also plays jazz three Sundays a month at the Bull and Bush as well as the Boulder Jazz Club.

This story includes excerpts from the 2011 Denver Museum of Nature and Science Volunteer Appreciation Celebration brochure.