

James R. Shields believes that if you want something you have to “take a chance and go for it.” He took a chance when he joined the Merchant Marines where he started as an apprentice seaman and worked his way to an officer during WWII. During the war he spent 6 hard-earned dollars on a book about the stock market, and then took a chance when he bought his first 10 shares of stock in a small company called Libby, valued at 8 7/8 dollars at the time.

“I knew I had to make money after the war, and I thought I would like to be a banker counting money,” Shields says. “Then I bought that book about the stock market and it was interesting.”

“The end of the war brought me to Fort Wayne because my dad had been transferred here with the Nickle Plate Railroad while I was gone,” he says. “I took the #5 bus downtown, went to the Merrill Lynch brokerage house on Berry Street and asked how to get a job there. I was told that the person recording stock prices at the chalkboard was leaving at the end of the week and I could have the job on Monday.”

It wasn't long before Shields moved from the chalkboard to cashier and then into sales. He continued to be successful in the company, even though he turned down opportunities to go to management school because “I was already making good money,” he says, “I liked Fort Wayne and I would most likely have had to leave if I pursued a management position.”

Shields enjoyed a 28-year working career at Merrill Lynch. His stock purchases in the company, another chance Shields says he took that included borrowing money, earned him a healthy profit when it later became a public entity.

“You have to be willing to take chances,” Shields says. “You also have to be willing to save money to take those chances. My wife and I set aside \$50 a month from the very beginning as our monthly investment plan. We were raising our three children and things were tough, but we still believed in saving every month.”

With his investments and the profits he earned, Shields bought and sold a variety of companies. It is in his nature to help small businesses get their start. He started Acme Heat Treat Company, for example. He also bought into Harris-Kayot and a railroad car protection company in Angola, and he was an owner of Parrot Market, Kitco, and Huntington Electric.

Then, in 1983, Shields took another chance, this time on a plumber's idea for a unique geothermal heating and cooling system.

Shields says, “The geothermal concept of heating and cooling I started as WaterFurnace International was a gamble, but it sounded right. Using the energy stored in the earth to transfer heat to and from your home just made good sense.”

The company began in a small warehouse on Speedway Drive with Shields and two other employees. Just two years later, it occupied a 10,000 square foot facility. In 1991, construction was completed on a 120,000 square foot manufacturing and headquarters building that is completely heated and cooled by the company's geothermal technology.

The company broke the \$100 million sales mark in 2007. Today, called WaterFurnace Renewable Energy, Inc, it is the industry leader in energy efficiency and quality with the largest market share of residential units in North America.

Shields is always very quick to point out how proud he is of the accomplishments of the 285 people employed by the company.

"Starting a business and being successful is the American way of life," Shields says. "I believe that if you have the money to invest and you can employ others, you are doing something worthwhile."

"God has been very good to me and my family, so I consider it my duty to give back to our community, local charities, and schools. It is an honor to be able to give back to the community that has given so much to me."

Shields has served on many community boards and charitable organizations over the years, including the Board of Trustees for the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum for 22 years, St. Anne Home & Retirement Community, and he currently still serves on the Allen County Historical Society.

Shields credits his success to "being honest and working hard. I don't go into a business because of greed or money. I believe in working hard and working smart. I tell young people to think about what they are doing, and then think about how they can improve it."

He also says people should "work with those they admire and learn from them. In addition, we all need to think well of ourselves so we can do well. You really are what you think you are."