As a Child, Warren Buck looked up at the skies with curious eyes. Why did the stars twinkle? Why did the sun go down? What was the shape of the universe? “I didn’t know then that my interest was physics. I didn’t know that name,” says the affable UW Bothell professor and first chancellor, whose phone message urges “Have a great day on this little planet.”

The esteemed physicist was selected last fall as a History Maker by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., his hometown. The program salutes African-Americans who make significant contributions to their field and records their oral histories for posterity. “I was very moved that I would be chosen,” says Buck, who schmoozed with the likes of Dionne Warwick and The Rev. Jesse Jackson at the Library of Congress reception. “I asked myself ‘Why me?’ and then I saw that I had mentored three or four of the History Makers in physics and realized, ‘I guess I did do something.’

Buck is equally celebrated for his dedication to students and his influential research into subjects like nuclear and subatomic particles. He is a major contributor to the international physics community, working with agencies such as the National Research Council and the National Academy of Sciences, where he helped advise NASA on science targets in the solar system.

He makes the most of his time on “this little planet.” This Renaissance man scuba dives, paints, leads meditation groups, sails, and explores. He funded one three-year adventure on a motorless boat by selling his art port to port.

Though he received a “D” in his first college physics class, the sky-gazer went on to earn an M.S. in experimental and theoretical plasma physics and a Ph.D. in theoretical relativistic nuclear physics. He describes physics as a powerful subject. “A few equations and assumptions help you see the world in such a different way. Once I discovered that, I couldn’t help but fall in love with it.”