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## 2007 HOUSTON FAST 100 ENTERPRISE CHAMPION



## Compassion, patriotism combine to drive Venturetech forward

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When Larry Keast gave a recovering addict a temporary job building a fence, he wasn't really expecting to keep him as an employee.

But he did. And that employee, who began by cleaning rest rooms and sweeping floors, remains clean and sober and is now the general manager of Venturetech — Swivel Engineering LP. In fact, three of the company's top managers are former addicts.

For Keast, president and CEO, it was just a matter of giving someone who deserved it a second chance. For many recovering addicts and those with felony records, these hiring tactics have proven a godsend.

*I may not have the most education and the most experience, but I have the most perseverance."*

**Larry Keast**  
Venturetech — Swivel Engineering LP

"I woke up one day and realized how many people we'd hired from these programs (Alcoholics Anonymous and other support groups)," Keast says. "At first we were just doing it passively, then we started doing it consciously. We can't save them all and we've seen all the difficulties. Some of them do relapse, but we believe they deserve a another chance."

Keast innovated and created the concept of America in Recovery ([www.american-recovery.org](http://www.american-recovery.org)), a nonprofit organization that supports free hiring Web sites for America's "unemployables."

"We have discovered these people are grateful to have a job, are people of integrity and are a good influence on the rest of us," he says.



DAVID A. FARIAS/HBJ

**Larry Keast says giving people a second chance has paid off for his company.**

In addition to the sites where recovering addicts can find work (and companies can find workers), his efforts have created a supportive work environment for employees.

"You can feel it when you walk through," he says. "It's an amazing place now. It's special."

An unconventional approach to human resources is not the only plus for Venturetech — Swivel Engineering, a company that Keast, who began in his garage in 1980, calls "the great American entrepreneur story."

With a more than 213 percent growth rate over the past two years, the company has also brought innovation to the marketplace through patented products.

He began by working on hydraulic drilling devices, but a knack for mechanical design and the promise of perfecting a better machine led him to design his own.

"We worked on everybody else's power swivels to make a living, so I learned the good things about them and I learned the bad things about them," he says. "I started with a

clean sheet of paper and I created this product line. I may not have the most education and the most experience, but I have the most perseverance."

Venturetech is openly marketed as a patriotic company ("If you don't like our flag, don't buy our equipment," the company brochure reads) and refuses to sell to some buyers.

"China, who does not respect our patent rights, wants to buy and copy our equipment," Keast explains. "We refuse to sell to China directly or to any company unable to prove they are not reselling to China."

The company grossed \$8.11 million in 2006.

"Since my business is oilfield manufacturing which is a very cyclic industry, I have no idea how to keep growth steady," Keast says. "All I know is to put profits back in the business, not go into debt and make hay while the sun shines."

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