

John Butler advocates “building a company around a patent for something that solves a pain.”



SUBMITTED PHOTO

ENERGETIC LEADER BLENDS HUMANITY AND TECHNOLOGY AT IC²

MICK NORMINGTON | CONTRIBUTING WRITER

John Sibley Butler is often in motion. His hands fly out from his 6-foot-4-inch frame to grab for books or computers or pat people on the back. Many describe him as a force of nature.

“He’s a free spirit. He’s always so excited and waving his arms. And I love it when he sings,” said Laura Kilcrease, managing director of Triton Ventures in Austin. She worked with Butler at the IC² Institute to launch new companies and ideas.

Butler, she said, understands people and is able to direct his frenetic spirit to energize and direct those around him.

“When we think about innovation, we think about technology, but John thinks about the human beings involved with the technology. If we can’t innovate with people, then at the end of the day we can have a great invention, but nobody will use it,” Kilcrease said.

Butler is being honored for his work at expanding entrepreneurship within the University of Texas as well as pushing the IC² Institute into countries such as Mexico, India, Poland, Portugal and Korea.

Born in New Orleans and raised in southern Louisiana, Butler and his three brothers and two sisters were fourth-generation college graduates who all played musical instruments in their college bands at their parents’ insistence. He attributes his energetic nature to his father.

“My father never sat still,” he said.

Butler’s father did sit him still his senior year of high school in 1965 to ask him to enroll at Louisiana State University to help integrate the southern university during the civil rights movement. The young Butler accepted and played in the LSU Tiger Band.

After graduating from LSU in 1969, he was drafted and became an Army medic in Vietnam.

Butler returned from Vietnam with medals and memories, and went on to earn a doctorate in sociology and organizational science from Northwestern University. Butler joined the University of Texas faculty in 1974 as a sociology professor, but his roles soon changed. At UT, Butler befriended business school Dean George Kozmetsky, who was a decorated World War II Army medic. The two men shared a belief that successful organizations came from the collaboration of ideas from science and the humanities. Butler eventually accepted a joint appointment in management and sociology and then joined the IC² Institute.

“Wealth creation is about going to the laboratories and building a company around a patent for something that solves a pain,” Butler said. “Austin is the best place to be. Dallas and Houston have all kinds of big companies, but Austin is a startup town. I’ve seen this city go from a town where Tex-Mex was considered a growth industry to a place where people can get good jobs and create real companies around forward-thinking ideas.”

The IC² Institute has grown into an international “think-and-do” center focused on addressing unstructured problems in entrepreneurship, technology commercialization and starting companies.

“The economy is never in equilibrium. It is constantly changing, and there is constant creative destruction,” Butler said.

An avid fan of business history, Butler sees advances in medical and engineering sciences starting to cause changes that should help the United States — and Central Texas in particular.

“The science of biotechnology and nanotechnology will make the computer revolution look small. It’s happening slowly, but it is happening. Pretty soon, inventions will al-

low walls to change color or allow you to change the color of your eyes or your skin. Then everybody’s going to want to look like John Butler because I’m so good looking,” Butler said with a laugh. “Technology is going to pick up tremendously over the next few years. Whether it happens in Austin is up to us.”

Butler may not sit still often, but he gets quiet when listening to a business plan.

“I remember the first time I met him, we were in his office,” said Alan Blake, 32, president of Yorktown Technologies LLC of Austin. “I explained my business, and I didn’t think he was even listening to me because he was practicing his golf swing. After 10 minutes of me talking, he spoke. Within five minutes he’d analyzed my company and said we needed to go in slightly different directions. And everything he said turned out to be right.”

“He’s dynamic, he’s knowledgeable, he’s energetic and he’s inspirational,” Blake said. “He’s always in motion. And he’s always smiling.”

Butler’s outgoing style has become an asset for UT.

“He mentors more than his fair share of students. He’s exactly the kind of professor you’d like students to experience,” said Thomas W. Gilligan, dean of the McCombs School of Business at UT. “He’s gregarious and very social. From playing the guitar at the staff Christmas party to hosting friends and benefactors at golfing events, John always helps people enjoy each other. His constant motion helps him experience and think more deeply about matters. All his motors are always running.”

“Everybody likes to be around him,” said Bill Cunningham, former UT president and system chancellor. “His approach was different than the rest of us who grew up in business schools. He was interested in patterns of success in organizations.”