



YOUTH ACTIVIST,
ALBERTA

WALLIS

KENDAL

Gabrielle is a miracle," says Wallis Kendal, referring to one of the hundreds of troubled kids he has rescued, who might well say the same about Kendal and his iHuman Youth Society. Housed in a derelict warehouse in downtown Edmonton, Alta., iHuman doesn't look like the kind of place to find a miracle, but you have to look past appearances. Inside are kids who have been in gangs or in jail, many so addicted or so violent that no one else would handle them. They are writing, acting, painting, composing, rapping and dancing. "We are ghetto," Kendal says. "But the kids don't care. This is their sanctuary."

Addicted to crystal meth and extremely violent, Gabrielle Rodgers was barred from most places in the city. "For two years, we'd have to close the building [and send everyone else out] when she walked in," Kendal says. Even the staff wanted to bar her, but Kendal refused. Eventually he prodded her to go to a drug-treatment center. She has been clean for more than a year now. "We got her into her own place and into school, and her average is 82%," Kendal says with pride. Rodgers, 20, sings, dances and is taking part in a play. She plans to study fine arts and return to work at iHuman as an art therapist.

An artist, Kendal has never followed the rules. iHuman's unconventional approaches and harm-reduction strategies, such as needle exchanges, have their critics. But Mark Cherrington of the Youth Criminal Defense Office in Edmonton says, "In my 14 years in youth court, I've never seen an agency

able to impact kids like iHuman has."

Kendal ascribes his success to the healing power of the arts. "Kids have unbelievable gifts locked inside of themselves, but you have to give them a key to unlock that gift," he says. Not everyone pursues those talents later on, but Kendal says art helps young people find a voice and sense of

self. Cherrington says it also helps the community appreciate these kids as individuals. "When you see a young person who does these amazing pieces of art, then you see them walk home and go live under a stairwell, it makes you think something is amiss."

Kendal has another secret weapon. "I cannot tell you how much I love these kids," he says. "If I can reclaim one at a time, I'm happy." He gets angry with them if they mess up, but they know he's there for them day and night if they are in trouble. And someone calls every night. Now in his 60s, Kendal wants to cut back from 70 to 40 hours a week, but he is still inspired seeing the kids start to reconstruct their lives. "My mother gave up on me, friends gave up on me," says Rodgers, "but Wallis never gave up on me." And that can make all the difference. —By Leigh Anne Williams. Reported by Melanie Collison/Edmonton