Brushstrokes of resilience: How Kendra Michelle turned adversity into art

By Sofia Vargas Karam

Paint-stained tables and the sharp smell of acrylics fill The Glassell Junior school room where Kendra Michelle Wilkinson teaches in Houston, Texas. Between the rows of over 15 students ages 6 to 8, she stops at a desk where a student works on a sculpture.

"Of course you can make a strawberry chicken," she said, granting the girl the freedom to explore her creativity. "You're so imaginative!"

At 29, Kendra, stands confidently at the head of her classroom — a position that once seemed out of reach. She has reclaimed her identity, no longer using her parents' last name, Wilkinson, after a childhood profoundly influenced by fundamentalist Mormonism. Her early years were defined by parents' firm belief in an approaching apocalypse and their denial of formal education. Their home served as a storage facility, housing pounds of grains and multiple guns. Army trucks parked in the driveway signaled their commitment to doomsday preparation. As preppers, her parents maintained an extensive emergency readiness system, their religious beliefs and political views driving them to prepare for what they saw as society's inevitable downfall.

Now, Kendra channels the contrast of her past into her present. She is a muralist and an art teacher. Her distinctive artistic style feels like stepping into a children's book — whimsical yet sophisticated. As a teacher, she creates a nurturing classroom environment that encourages creativity, imagination and critical thinking, offering her students the supportive space she wished for in her own childhood.

The walls of her childhood home in Houston were bare and unfinished. She bathed in a tub with a jagged pipe sticking out of a sheetrock wall. It was the only working tub in their entire house for a family of seven. There were no family photos, no trace of a shared past on the walls. Her parents would disappear for days at a time, leaving Kendra (the middle child), and her four siblings to manage on their own. She didn't know where they went.

The neglect of their home mirrored deeper dysfunction. Within the unfinished walls, Kendra's mother's explosive anger dominated daily life. She had episodes of screaming, throwing objects and punching holes in walls. When I asked about her father, Kendra paused. He operated differently but no less harmfully. He weaponized guilt and shame, warning the children they would be to blame if their parents went to jail for not providing an education. When the children asked about attending school, their parents claimed it would lead to humiliation, saying they'd be placed in classes with, in their words, "retarded children," a label they said would disgrace the family. Despite recognizing her curiosity and quick mind, these messages left a mark on Kendra. "I grew up thinking I wasn't smart," she said. "Imagine being a house plant in a pot and not getting the nourishment that you need because you can't help yourself."

Kendra spent her early teenage years sitting on the floor of her room littered by art. Her fingers were constantly smudged by paint or charcoal as she worked on a new piece. In front of her, a tree was taking shape – a gnarled, twisted trunk that seemed to bear the weight of invisible

burdens. At just 14 years old, Kendra saw the drawing as a way of expressing something too deep, too complicated, to say aloud.

Kendra and her siblings were like Peter Pan's Lost Boys, a mismatched group under one roof, bound not by resemblance but by the shared strangeness of their upbringing. Feelings of abandonment and confusion created a bond between them, yet Kendra knew it was clear that her parents were, in her words, “crazy.” Even as a child, she began to notice the peculiarities in her family that set them apart. The friends she made through her Mormon congregation’s ward, a community where Latter-day Saints build friendships and support one another, began asking questions too, validating her feelings and confirming it wasn’t all in her head.

Her siblings each had their own ways of coping. Krista, her sister, turned to photography. Her brothers Carson and Sterling were into sports. “And then Alyssa. Alyssa could be the first woman president,” said Kendra.

For Kendra, it was art. "I was just always doodling and drawing and painting," she said. “People can admire what you made, and it requires no math, or traditional measure of intelligence.” She’d doodle on the walls of her home, despite the consequences. Each unauthorized mural was her quiet revolution.

Art became her education in a house where school was never an option. She’d watch other kids get off the school bus from her window, imagining what it would be like to have that kind of normalcy. “We’d talk about what our lives would be like if we were normal,” she said, thinking of her brother. “We’d wonder what kind of classes we would have? What kind of extracurriculars would we have been interested in that the school would have provided? And like, would we be popular? Would we be losers? Like, what would we be like?”

One day, her father came into her room to get something, or tell her something. He paused, his eyes landing on her drawing of the tree with nails driven into its bark. It was the charcoal piece of the tree. “I made it symbolize every single horrible thing my dad had ever done that made myself and my siblings and my mom feel horrible,” Kendra said.

For a moment, Kendra worried he’d ask about the meaning, but he only nodded at the drawing, murmuring, “Oh man, I’ve felt like that before.” He didn’t realize it was about him. He simply looked, then left, leaving her alone again. She sat there feeling anger, sadness and a hint of relief.

“In my mind, I didn't have the way to articulate it at that time, but that was the moment where I realized what he had done to me, someone had done to him. And I was like ‘Oh, this is a generational thing,’” said Kendra. “So where does it stop?”

That same painting hung in her father’s office for years.

Art became her way of understanding herself, of building a language that was her own.

"It's a survival strategy," said art therapist Bees Green. Drawing from her years of experience, she explained how art creates a crucial distance between a person and their pain – the brush strokes and symbols allowing them to step back from wounds that otherwise feel ever-present.

Through photographs, sculptures and paintings, people begin to see their experiences as part of their story rather than their entire reality. For Green, this marks a profound shift in healing: "Yes, that happened to me. I'm not denying it," she said, explaining a common perspective she has observed in her work. "But somehow, that's the power of being human — we overcome things."

As a teenager, Kendra found that art couldn't fully help her navigate the challenges of her family's survivalist lifestyle, but it did open a window to life beyond it. Despite her restrictive beliefs, Kendra's mother enrolled her in an oil painting class at the Woodlands Academy of Art. Kendra found herself among adults, already feeling older than 14 years old. She said her mother didn't allow her to be anything less than exceptional. Any time she showed her mother a drawing, she'd sit down at the table to draw it five or seven more times. Perfection was the only acceptable outcome.

Through art classes and web searches, Kendra began to shape her interests and learn. When the house was silent and everyone was asleep, Kendra would sneak onto the family computer, making a refuge for herself in the world of YouTube videos. She'd watch fashion designers talk about their inspirations, or makeup artists like Pat McGrath transform models with a brush.

She spent her late teenage years caring for her four siblings and managing the household until she was 19. Her parents separated for five years, ending in divorce. Her father's new wife, Viviana, an educator, forged a high school transcript, giving Kendra the opportunity to attend community college.

Her first writing assignment at community college was a memoir. Kendra found herself staring at a blank page. "I didn't have any good memories at the time, so I just made some things up," she said. The fear of being discovered for the forged transcript and the possibility of failing weighed heavily on her, but when she saw that she got an A on her first assignment, a fabricated memoir, something shifted. For the first time, Kendra began to see herself as a good writer, a creative thinker, and, most surprisingly to her, as someone who was smart.

The opportunity to finish community college was cut short when she was diagnosed with Vulvodynia, a chronic disease that forced her to withdraw from her studies. She dealt with constant, unbearable pain and struggled with the side effects of different treatments. She tried everything from antidepressants and nerve blocks to even drinking to dull the pain. Eventually, after a lot of research she discovered a holistic approach that worked. She began taking supplements and identified which foods either helped or hindered her condition until finally the pain began to subside. She was frustrated and desperate for a change.

At 22, Kendra decided to move to Austin with a boyfriend, but the next few years were a blur of back-and-forth between Austin and Utah. "I was just having a meltdown," she said. "Then I was really unhappy in Utah because it's awful there. So I moved back to Austin to also be with the boy. And then that didn't work out again, so I moved back to Utah."

In Utah, she worked at Good Earth Market, a health-focused grocery store, using the knowledge she had gained about managing her chronic illness. It was during this time that she met Josh Aker while he was standing in line at Good Earth. He was buying a protein powder that Kendra couldn't resist teasing him about. "I kind of bullied him for it," she said, pointing out that the

product wasn’t all that great. Aker is a composer and filmmaker with several independent projects under his belt. Their friendship formed around long conversations about the artistic process, despite working in different mediums.

"The thing I found most interesting about Kendra’s art is that she has the imagination of a child, but the resourcefulness of an adult," Aker said. "She can take these wild ideas that come naturally to her and make them real, like a child who somehow learned to build anything."

Utah challenged her twenties deeply, draining the vibrancy and spontaneity that defined her. "I felt like a tropical bird drying out in the desert," she said. "I hated how brown and orange everything was. If I saw one more piece of red rock, I was going to throw it at somebody." The friends she made — mostly other transplants — would leave after six months, equally defeated by the landscape and climate. She drank to combat the constant cold and loneliness. "I was pretty much angry all the time," she said. "Angry about how lonely I was, angry that I moved there. Just angry and miserable."

But in that isolation, she found focus. In her first apartment in Provo, she painted a mural up the stairs, similar to the doodles she’d draw on the walls of her childhood home — so impressive that her landlords not only returned her deposit but insisted on keeping the mural. It was that was the moment where she realized this “whole painting-on-walls thing” could be a job.

In her second department in Salt Lake City, she started working on what she calls the "monkey mural," painting it directly onto the walls of her apartment bedroom. She craved the vibrant colors missing from the Utah landscape—chartreuse green, lilac, jungle textures. "I wanted it to be magical," she said, "though I had no idea what I was going to paint. " The mural became an outlet for her homesickness, a way to reimagine "home"—a place that, for her, had meant empty rooms stocked with emergency supplies and the looming weight of her parents' expectations. But this time, the mural was not the escape route of her childhood years, but instead a tool she'd learned to use with confidence. The 14-year-old who once saw her creativity as a burden had grown into an artist who understood its power. "All creativity is problem solving," Kendra said. "It's about thinking outside the box and coming up with a solution."

Aker watched the “monkey mural” unfold. "It's fascinating to watch it come together," he said. "Starting with what feels like a pencil sketch, then flat colors, then layered colors. And before you know it, you've got this masterpiece on a wall that is huge and sprawling. It's as if the paint itself has depth. It looks like you could walk into it."

The process was messy and challenging, but transformative. When Kendra commits to her projects she will do whatever it takes to make sure they’re as perfect as they can be, even if it means not sleeping for a couple of nights to finish the piece. "Painting feels a lot like what I imagine giving birth feels like," she said. "It's a goddamn mess the whole way through, and at the end it's a miracle that you pulled it off."

She did not have permission from her apartment to paint on the walls of her rental, but even the complex's "mean, crappy office lady" was transformed by the final result.

"Oh, okay, I see what you mean," she told Kendra, rushing to photograph it for corporate.

The mural stayed.

The “monkey mural” holds a special place in her heart. Its vibrant chartreuse jungle, with Capuchin monkeys and lilac flowers, filled her downtown Utah apartment with memories of childhood dreams of becoming a professional artist and painting on a grand scale. It was a moment when she began to find her way back from what art therapist and Somatic Experiencing practitioner Green describes as a "too much state." This state, brought on by trauma, disrupts our ability to process time, make connections, or find meaning. The mural became a tool for reconnection and meaning. Her nervous system began to find its way back to solid ground. Through the process, she was unconsciously doing what Green describes as the vital work of trauma recovery—using creative expression to help the brain make new connections and process overwhelming experiences at its own pace.

And so, Kendra continues to paint indoor murals that allow her to feel connected to her inner child.

"You always know if she's been painting," Aker said. "If you see her at the coffee shop, she's covered in paint. Unabashedly and unapologetically. She thinks in paint. Everywhere she goes, whatever she looks at is a canvas."

That observation rings true today in Kendra’s Houston apartment. After Utah, she decided to move back to the city she grew up in. She sat across from Holly Minshall and me, her hands and Mickey Mouse sweatshirt streaked with fresh paint. Minshall has been one of my closest friends for 10 years, and she introduced me to Kendra. Minshall met her while working at Free People Movement, and the two have been inseparable ever since. Her cat, Suki, roamed between canvases that lined the walls. Above her kitchen, another jungle mural spread across the white wall, reminiscent of the one she left in Utah. Music played low through a speaker.

Kendra's home is warm and inviting—it feels like stepping into a living art studio. The walls are mix-matched with different projects, and art supplies are scattered throughout the studio apartment. There is one small couch and one bed. Kendra welcomed me with open arms, her warmth and friendliness immediately apparent. Her friends describe her as reliable and kind, with a deep dedication to her craft. Wherever she’s needed, Kendra shows up. And when she sets her mind to something, she sees it through—no matter how many times she has to redo it.

Minshall has seen Kendra’s evolution firsthand, noting how her personal growth is often reflected in the art she creates. “There’s always something different in her apartment. One time I even walked in and all the walls were black and I knew it meant something,” Minshall said, describing how Kendra’s experiments with colors and techniques mirror the changes in her own life. From breakups to successes, Holly has stood by her through it all, offering support during both good and challenging times.

One of those challenges came in September 2023, when Kendra faced emergency surgery for intestinal malrotation, a condition she had because of a birth defect. Sitting in the hospital room before the operation, she found herself thinking about mortality in a way she never had before. She looked around, noticing every detail of the room, as if each object might be the last thing she’d see. Her thoughts drifted to all the things she hadn’t done yet—the trips she had always

wanted to take, the feeling of being deeply in love with someone who truly loved her back, and the experiences she had hoped to have but never did.

Then, in the middle of all those thoughts, she asked herself, “Kenny, are you okay with yourself?” To her surprise, the answer brought her peace. She was so happy and proud of who she was as a person. She thought, “If I die, the one thing I can say that I did totally right was me.” Despite the hardships of her life she has always had a very deep appreciation for herself. "My body was like my island, and I wanted to love and take care of and defend my island,” she said. “And, my mind was like the universe that the island was in."

When Minshall came to visit her in the hospital, it became a moment they both said they will always remember. “You’re making me cry. I’m so proud of you,” Minshall said, recalling how overwhelmed she felt that day. “I remember I was freaking out in the hallway, and when I finally came into the hospital room, all I could say was, ‘I brought you a magazine.’”

Kendra smiled as she thought about it. “You looked so perfect,” she said to Minshall. “Your eyes were so blue and sparkly. Your skin was glowing. And you just turned around with your little hair in the banana clip, holding a single flower and these magazines —Vogue and In Touch Weekly—and you said, ‘Kendra, I just had to.’”

When I asked about her relationship with her parents, Kendra paused to reflect. She said her mother is so different now. They text and see each other often and they even go to the bar together, something she never thought she'd be able to do. In many ways, Kendra feels her parents are becoming who they were always meant to be, though it’s taken time and reflection to see that. But with her father, it’s a different story. “There’s still some distance,” she said. “It’s not the same.” But she’s committed to working on their relationship. “It’s one of the toughest things I’ve ever done,” Kendra said. “But it’s also one of the most rewarding.” She doesn't think she can forgive her parents, but she understands that "what resists persists.” After years of reflection she understands their actions "were a result of what was done to them." Her parents often unloaded their unresolved trauma onto her, a reflection of their own tragic upbringing. Their early experiences left them trapped in cycles of pain and fueled their deep belief in doomsday beliefs.

Kendra’s reflections on her parents has helped her gain understanding and acceptance, even in the absence of complete forgiveness. This process of confronting and reframing the past mirrors the transformative energy she brings to every aspect of her life. Whether in her personal relationships, her teaching, or her art, Kendra channels her experiences into acts of creation and connection.

Between teaching and working on personal projects, she continued painting indoor murals, discovering how both expand creative practice in unexpected ways. Like her favorite book, “Fahrenheit 451,” which warns of a world where students are taught answers instead of questions, she dedicated herself to creating genuine curiosity and open inquiry in her classroom. Her teaching philosophy stems from her own challenging childhood. She thoughtfully created the safe, empowering space she wished she'd had, healing her inner child while helping her students flourish.

This same spirit of transformation shines through in her most recent project, where she reimagined her apartment building's utilitarian laundry and mail room into a vibrant, welcoming space. The mural features an immersive tropical design, with vibrant colors and animals moving through lush foliage and whimsical details that transform the once-sterile room into a place of warmth and life.

Her work, whether in the classroom or on walls, radiates playfulness and wonder—a reflection of someone who has held onto the childlike curiosity many adults lose. Her students fuel this spark, inspiring her as much as she inspires them. From Utah's concrete walls to Houston's laundry rooms, from designing lesson plans to painting murals, she carries out her dual mission: transforming spaces and shaping young minds. Through her art and teaching, she breathes life and purpose into even the most unexpected places—just as she has done her whole life.