

RYAN ROCCAFORTE • THE DAILY IOWAN • July 23, 2010

## Spotlight: A hit with the kids

Back when he still had hair, Stu Mullins felt a bit uneasy about working with kids every day, but 22 years later, helping Iowa City's youth through music has become his niche.

The youth-center coordinator at Iowa City's United Action for Youth spends a majority of his day befriending the 30 to 50 kids who stop by daily, but he finds most pleasure in his passion for music at the center.



"The music studio is a really great conduit to work with kids," Mullins said. "You get to view their feelings through their art and share that with them. You feel like you're really connecting artistically with a kid, and I find that really rewarding."

The connection Mullins shares in the studio with the kids often offers an experience unlike any other.

"As it turns out, young people like music; it's a really great way to meet kids," he said. "They're so into it, and once you get into that world, you're instantly their friend and they like you."

United Action for Youth's youth center provides a stage for newly accomplished musicians to perform their work — from rap battles to rock shows — in an arena flowing with mutual respect.

"This is a great place to practice a way of how you want to live your life as you grow older," Mullins said.

Although a majority of his time with the youth is spent in the recording studio, he always catches up with those who come in primarily to relax, giving him an opportunity to understand each person on an individual level, including Alex Alva, 13.

Alva prefers drawing in the art studio to music at the youth center, but she can attest to Mullins' warmheartedness.

"He's friendly, and he makes it a fun place to hang out and make friends," she said.

Mullins takes it upon himself to understand the youth deeply, noting that it allows him to appreciate their struggles, their successes, and their interests.

Kylie Buddin, a prevention specialist at the youth center, recalls when Mullins assisted a teen on an album project that may have turned his life around.

"He went from getting a few guitar lessons to making a very professional CD. It was probably the best day of the kid's whole life," Buddin said. "It was amazing to watch him grow. A lot of that was due to his own talent, but Stu's fostering of that talent as well."

Mullins, who believes the youth center keeps him young, takes that with him when he consoles a youth in need.

"For kids who have come across a lot of adversity, he's able to treat them in a manner that makes them feel respected, safe, and able to express themselves," Buddin said.

The youth center also offers a wide range of counseling programs.

"We're not fixing every problem with young people by any stretch of the imagination, but we have a pretty strong influence on a big set of kids, and we like that," Mullins said. "We're here when you want us and there when you need us."