



Jon Sundt

Escape to Reality

Writer: Chris Ahrens Photos: Bill Zelman

As a surfer coming of age in the 1970s, Jon Sundt heard all the stories of how drugs would take you to new and wonderful places. Like many from his generation, he buckled to the pressure, but when the "experiment" went wrong, ending in a desperate nightmare rather than the promised dream, Sundt said goodbye forever to that dark world. The oldest of three brothers, Jon had learned a quick and relatively painless lesson, while his younger brothers Steven and Eric apparently never saw the train coming. Burying young family members as a result of their drug use stimulated Jon in a way no chemical ever could, and it was this pain that launched the Sundt Memorial Foundation, whose stated mission reads, "To influence the hearts and minds of kids by inspiring them to live their natural high and to reject drugs."

Jon, who knows the horrors of drug abuse better than most, nonetheless wanted to do something more than retell tragic stories. A lifelong love of surfing made him realize that he, along with everyone else, had the ability to get high without ingesting anything stronger than food, air, and water. Sundt initiated a video campaign he termed *Natural High*. The fourth in a series of these powerful videos, which feature world-class athletes touting the merits of a drug-free life, hits public schools free-of-charge with the intent of making a stronger impact than the drugs that invaded our culture decades ago.

Interviewed exclusively for vice magazine in La Jolla, California

Vice Magazine: Most movies on drugs accent the negative; *Natural High* emphasizes the positive. Why?

Jon Sundt: In order to say no to something, you have to say yes to something better. It is really clear to me that everyone has something better to do than drugs. I looked at how very smart people were marketing to kids. They don't say, "Don't wear these shoes whatever you do." No, they put their brand of shoes on a kid's heroes. So, I felt that the heroes of kids could speak out and say that a natural high is far better than drugs.

RM: You've got some big names in your videos, but why don't more celebrities get involved?

JS: There's a lot of wonderful people that kids look up to that live by and large clean lives. A lot of these guys are controlled by agents and handlers, and ... there's really no money in saying, I prefer to get my natural high over drugs.

RM: When I was a kid, marijuana was bad and cigarettes were almost considered good. Now it's the opposite. It's like society can't handle too much goodness at a time.

JS: Don't trust everything you read, or everything you see on TV. There's a dark message in the system that suggests that drugs are cool.

RM: Not many people in the media say that directly.

JS: It's the back current. Watch a music video channel for a while, or some of these reality shows. They're glorifying something that's going to kill you or

ruin your life.

RM: Someone saying that marijuana is an illegal gateway drug might not be enough reason for a kid to stop.

JS: There's a lot of data that shows it's medically not good for you. And it alters your perception of reality. What's wrong with reality? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that if you're a stoner it's going to take away from your achievements. In my world, the highly competitive business world, you wouldn't hire a stoner. I think that's true for athletics.

RM: So what makes a curious kid think about sobriety?

JS: If you put a cop in front of a kid and say, "I dare you not to do drugs," a lot of kids will go out and do 'em. You're an authority and you're challenging their independence. Now, go to a kid and say, "You've got a skill and if you follow your dreams you're going to go to a place that's much better than where drugs could ever take you. In fact drugs will slow you down or stop you from ever realizing that dream." That's a powerful message, especially if it's from somebody they look up to.

RM: How did drugs change your life?

JS: When I was in junior high in the '70s, there was a message similar to today, that if you wanted to be cool you had to do drugs. We were lookin' up to like Led Zeppelin, the Who, the Doors, and a lot of those people ended up dying.

Like many young kids I experimented before I was enlightened. I saw what was happening to my brothers through drugs. I was seventeen or eighteen and I decided that I didn't want any part of that culture anymore. I took a left-hand turn and my brothers took a right-hand turn.

My brother Steven was a full-blown addict in high school. It started with pot and ended with cocaine. He ended up dying in the back seat of a cop car on a stormy evening in Northern California. He was fighting for his life when he pulled over looking for help, cut his heart was stopping. The cops were called and they took him away and he died in a jail cell. I remember getting that call at two in the morning, like it was yesterday. They said, "Are you Jon Sandt?" I said yeah. They said, "Are you related to Steven Sandt?" I said, "Yeah, he's my brother." The guy on the phone said, "He just died in our jail. I fell on my knees and cried out to God."

*...have a Natural High Day where kids have a chance to think about what their God-given talents are.

From his first toke of marijuana to using cocaine was a seven-year journey that ended in death for Steve. My other brother, Eric, had been getting deeply involved in drugs and he had committed a crime. Instead of being sentenced to prison, he got sentenced to Patton State Mental Hospital for sobbing a McDonald's with a pellet gun. His hand was shaking so badly that the guy behind the counter said, "That's not a real gun." My brother ran out and was arrested. He had been under doctor's treatment for bipolar disorder. Thinking that the mental health system would be better than prison, we pleaded insanity. When you go to those hospitals there's no determinate sentence. They interview you every six months and ask how you're doing. And every six months Eric was doing a lot worse, our those places are hell on earth. He ended up being there eight years, for petty robbery.

After I buried Steve, I had to drive up and tell Eric that his brother had just died. That was a bad day. A few years later, Eric got out and took his life. I feel very strongly that if Eric had never gone down the drug path, a lot of that stuff wouldn't have happened him.

RM: Since then you've probably seen that story played out a lot more times than you care to mention.

JS: Yeah, when you think about it, everyone is one or two degrees away from a story like that. Maybe not so dramatic, but how many of us know somebody whose life has been turned upside down because of addiction. How many young people have thrown away their lives, at the time thinking it was cool or the way to fit in.

RM: When you're in junior high and high school, you only see the beginning of addiction. Sometimes you don't see the results for years later.

JS: You think you're indestructible when you're that age. The long-term effects are well documented, but kids don't think of long-term consequences. They think in terms of immediate gratification.

RM: We see photos of Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison as young, handsome men. We never see the horrific images of their final hours.

JS: Exactly. If you look at the fallen heroes of drugs... Elvis Presley's estate doesn't make a whole lot of money showing pictures of Elvis fat and OD'ed. They make money showing pictures of Elvis in his prime, when he was drug free. They don't want anyone to see those other pictures. A picture of Jim Morrison dead in his hotel room would be a great anti-drug campaign. Instead, all you see is this cool Jim Morrison.

RM: I recently saw a website about rock 'n' rollers who had died from drugs. We can all name four or five, but there were hundreds of bands that had lost members, while they were in the prime of life.

JS: It's not just the people who died, but also those whose lives have been ruined. Those numbers there are even more staggering. Death by a thousand cuts. Look at *Celebrity Rehab*, Dr. Drew, it's just horrifying. It's about time we got some prime time media showing what's really going on.

RM: Doing a Natural High TV show right after *Celebrity Rehab* could be interesting.

JS: My dream and vision would be to someday have a Natural High day. Rather than an anti-drug day, which I think is important, have a Natural High day where kids have a chance to think about what their God-given talents are. We give 'em some tools to explore and excel in those talents. We teach kids about history and dangling particles; why not sit down with a kid and talk about what their natural high is?

RM: You say natural high, but each of us probably has far more than one.

JS: We all have multiple natural highs. It's the feeling you get when you do something that improves your self-confidence... when your brain produces those chemicals from kicking a soccer goal or getting up on stage. Those are the best feelings in the world.

RM: In our cities, some of the natural highs for young men have been eliminated. There are no bears to try and outwit, nothing to hunt with a bow, no mountains to climb. On top of that, there's often no dad to take you to the wilderness. With fewer options to getting high, no wonder so many young men turn to drugs and violence.

JS: Drug prevention is such a big issue, there's no magic bullet. There are so many ways to approach it. One thing I know is that treatment is very expensive. Treatment costs tens and tens and tens of thousands of dollars. It can be effective, but in many cases it's too late. The side of the fence I want to be on is prevention. The message to kids has to be continual and repetitive. It can't just be once. My goal is to get the Natural High videos into schools and get them used all the time, constantly.

RM: Yeah, as soon as they leave the classroom, they're bombarded by the opposite message.

JS: Look at what the alcohol industry spends, and don't for a moment think those ads aren't targeting kids. The background is clear. The nice thing about school is that it's the last place where a kid has his butt in a seat uninterrupted, not on a cell phone.

RM: In order, what are your natural highs?

JS: I would say love, giving and receiving, surfing, business.

RM: I know that some young teachers want to be cool with the kids and don't tell them anything they don't want to hear.



JS: When I started this I was shocked by the lack of powerful, impacting content being delivered to our kids. It's [Natural High] nothing Hollywood would make.

RM: What about the war on dope?

JS: I don't think you can fight a war on dope; I think that's a waste. I think we need to be raising kids onto a better choice to win their hearts and minds.

RM: Natural High is effective in showing great athletes getting high on accomplishment, but some athletes will use drugs for all sorts of reasons, including performance enhancement.

JS: What possible long-term benefit can drug use have on a professional athlete's career? There are so many stories of athletes who have had everything taken away from them because they got involved

in drugs. The Olympics do a really good job of dope testing. I can't speak to someone who wants to get away with everything.

RM: We base our lives on the avoidance of

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pain. From the time we're children we're told to take something for a headache, not figure out why we have one.

JS: There's a lot of drug use happening through the parents' medicine cabinets now. Kids know what Valium is, Percocet . . . Two hundred years ago if you had a headache, you laid down.

RM: We'll never know the full effects of drug use. I don't have the statistics, but there must have been fought because somebody was drunk or loaded.

JS: When you walk through life it's a really fine line. Everyone's given opportunities to blow it or step-over the line. It's like a slip 'n' slide. If you get on it, you don't know where you're going to stop. That's the danger. Some people get away with it for a long time.

RM: Some people drink every day and die in bed at ninety-five.

JS: Yeah, but if you look at the long-term studies from excessive drinking, you do a lot of damage to your brain. The brain plasticity gets totally messed up. As you get older you have lower memory functions, lower cognitive functions. That's just coming out now.

RM: People always say I'm going to have a drink or smoke a little pot. That usually doesn't mean a little of anything.

JS: When I speak at schools, it's so cool to see a kid focused on something that's giving them a natural high. You know right away when they're involved in something good. They're in a group involved with something and they don't need it or want it [drugs]. As opposed to the kid who's kind of bored, maybe not very self-confident, trying to prove something to themselves, and they're going out blowing their brains out. Nearly every time I've spoken to a school here in San Diego, afterwards a kid's come up to me in tears. They have a story to tell, and it's so sad—my mom, my cousin, my older brother. They have a story that's been told a thousand times, but to this person it's a nightmare. I told one girl, "A diamond has to be cut to shine. The story you told me feels like a cut, but it's going to make you shine in life." Drugs are somewhat of a silent killer. It's shameful when you're a child when someone you know dies of drugs or alcohol. Maybe it's not death, but it's shameful when somebody goes into an addiction spiral. They lose their job; they lose their family. Or, if it's a young kid, they lose their future. That's why at the end of the video I am standing over my brother's grave. It has to be real; it can't be costumed.



Our Mission

To influence the hearts and minds of kids by inspiring them to live their natural high and to reject drugs.

We speak the language of youth by using cutting-edge technology, such as DVD's and websites, which use icons, idols and peers to show kids that their natural high is better than drugs.

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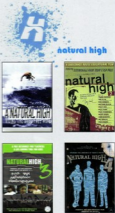
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