

Union-Tribune/LAURA EMBURY

**Tragic memories:** Jon Sundt reads an old letter from his brother, Eric, written from Patton State Hospital. Jon plans to establish a surfing contest as a memorial to both his dead brothers.

## Surfing contest to be a memorial

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Staff Writer

Life's path has been far from a yellow brick road for 33-year-old Jon Sundt. The La Jolla resident has twice had to swallow tragedy — each time in large doses.

In 1988, his brother Steve died from an overdose of cocaine. Last January, another brother, Eric, who suffered for more than a decade from severe depression, committed suicide by leaping off the San Diego-Coronado Bridge.

"I was very close to both of them," says Sundt, whose only surviving sibling is a sister, who lives in Los Angeles.

Each of the deaths shook the family to its core.

"It affected all of us very deeply," he recalls. "It's a complete shocker."

As a way to honor his brothers and to raise money for causes that can help people suffering from mental illness and drug addiction, Sundt is helping to organize the 1995 UCSD Sundt Memorial Open, a benefit surfing contest scheduled for Jan. 21-22 at Black's Beach in La Jolla.

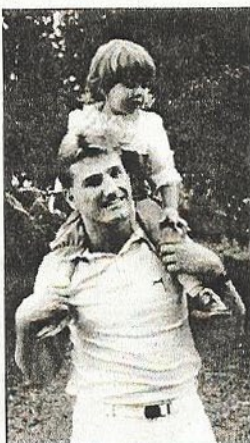
Sundt promises that all proceeds of the event will be donated to Teen Challenge, Sobriety House and other nonprofit drug rehabilitation and mental health services. (Entry information is available by calling 534-8085.)

While the two brothers were alive, the Sundt family struggled constantly, emotionally and financially, with decisions on how to help Eric and Steve deal with their afflictions.

Steve enrolled in several expensive drug treatment programs and fought his addiction for 10 years before it finally overtook him. He left behind a wife and young daughter.

Treatment for Eric's mental illness, which did not surface until he was a junior in college, was also a seesaw of frustration for the family.

"We couldn't find good treatment for him — just hospitals," Jon Sundt recalls. "He tried many times to make it on his own, but he always came back home a few weeks later, frustrated. There were a lot of tragic pilgrimages that he came



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**The brothers:** Steve Sundt and his daughter, left. He was 28 when he died in 1988 of a cocaine overdose. His brother, Eric, is shown (right) with their mother, before his 1994 suicide, when he leaped from the San Diego-Coronado Bridge.

home from, defeated."

In 1986, Eric was committed to Patton State Hospital in San Bernardino after he robbed a fast-food restaurant with a pellet gun. He later explained that he was desperate for money to fly to Hawaii, where he thought he could make a new life for himself.

After seven years, he was released — a wreck of his former self.

"When he finally made it out, he was so oppressed and damaged inside that it was very hard for him to get up and running," Jon Sundt recalls.

As the eldest brother, Jon willingly became his brothers' keeper.

On the many occasions when they were destitute or in trouble, he gladly bailed them out.

Steve Sundt died at 28; brother Eric made it to 31.

After the pangs of grief subsided, Jon Sundt decided that the final word on his brothers' deaths should not be left on their gravestones.

"Something good can come out of a tragedy if you follow through on your convictions," he says.

Sundt is an accomplished surfer, who, when not ripping at La Jolla Shores or Black's Beach, is director of managed accounts at the La Jolla branch of an international investment firm.

He's also one of those be-true-to-your-school kind of guys.

While attending the University of California at San Diego, he never forgot the friends he made as a member of the surf team. After graduation, he became an expert rock climber and returned to UCSD to teach the sport at the college's recreation program.

When Scott Bernades, UCSD's director of intramural sports, mentioned recently to Sundt that the surf team had always wanted to host a competition at Black's Beach but could never scrape up the money to do so, inspiration overcame both men.

Their conversation became the genesis of the charity surf contest.

Sundt hopes the event can help programs that perhaps don't get a lot of press or government grants but that can be effective because of

their passion and dedication.

"If you have a friend or loved one going through a mental health or a drug crisis, many times you cannot afford treatment," Sundt says.

He's hoping to raise as much as \$20,000, and through sponsorships and corporate donations, he already is a third of the way toward his goal.

As a tribute to his late brothers, Sundt is underwriting the cost — an amount he does not want to disclose — to stage the contest.

"This is a contest that really means something," he says. "What I'm trying to do is to get young kids involved who love to surf and have them realize that you can surf, not do drugs, and still be cool."

Another theme Sundt wants to the contest to represent is compassion.

"If I hadn't been through this personally, I'd be a much harder person ... much more calloused," he says. "When you see these things happen to the people you love, it wakes you up."

And in his case, it distills the grief into a positive wave.