

Sundt's true worth is sending a sobering message to youth

He sports the physique of an NFL linebacker, but it's the hefty saltwater wedges at La Jolla's Black's Beach that Jon Sundt prefers to tackle.

You'd never know it by his modest demeanor, but this lifelong surfer is a self-made millionaire who shatters the stereotyped image of the surfing slacker.

The strength of his body is matched by the acuity of his mind.

As a vice president for an international investment firm, Sundt travels the globe to recruit the best money managers he can find. He then tracks their performance for high-end investors who need a minimum \$500,000 to get into the pool.

"I'm like the talent scout and the watchman," he said.

Away from his beloved ocean, this pillar-necked surfer is a warrior, actually.

He's dedicated himself to fighting the spread of drug use among young people, and especially among surfers.

He doesn't want anyone to go through what he has: losing both his brothers to the scourge of drug abuse and drug-induced mental illness.

Through the Sundt Memorial Foundation, he contributes money to non-profit groups that assist drug addicts and the mentally ill.

To reach further into the community, he's produced a video of surfers called "Natural High" that offers a drug-free message. He gives it away to small non-profit groups and makes it available at low cost to any school.

And, since 1995, he's sponsored a surf contest at Black's Beach to raise money for the foundation. The Sundt Memorial Open is scheduled this year for April 24-25.

Sundt is also a major supporter of WRAD, Wave Riders Against Drugs, a one-man road show created by Mike Young, a 48-year-old Hawaiian now living in San Clemente.

Young, a convicted cocaine smuggler, has been preaching the anti-drug gospel to young surfers since he had a vision in prison that prompted him to reclaim his soul and his life.

Sundt, 37, who will soon become a father for the first time, will try any tack he feels is necessary to persuade kids to avoid drugs, including shock and fear.

Recently, he stood on a stage in front of 450 teenagers at Muirlands Middle School in La Jolla and made a somber prediction — that a few of them would make the wrong choice and, perhaps, pay the ultimate price.

"Some of you aren't going to make it," he said.

You don't have to look any further than the pump house wall at Windansea Beach to find the graffiti-

etched names of local kids who took this path of self-destruction.

"It's sad and it's heavy," Sundt told the teens, who seemed riveted by his heartfelt words.

Sundt's sober testimonial about the aching void left by his brothers' deaths provided the most real and gripping moments of the school assembly, which featured appearances by pro surfer Rob Machado and former pro Peter King.

The teenie-boppers in the audience squealed with delight when Machado arose to speak. Battling stage fright, Machado seemed vulnerable and likable. But as a public speaker, he lacked focus and intensity — attributes that, ironically, make his surfing so amazing to watch.

"I wake up every day and go surfing and I love it," he said, trying to switch into automatic pilot. It didn't work.

King, a professional pitchman with extensive TV experience, snickered as he watched his friend flounder.

Trying to toss his buddy a lifeline, King yelled a question from the sidelines: "Are you better than (six-time world surfing champion) Kelly Slater?"

"I'm better at ping pong," Machado replied. The girls loved his shy smile.

Finally rescuing the microphone from his simper-faced pal, King showed why he's still such a hot commodity in the surf industry even though his surfing is reportedly about as sharp as the end of a vacuum cleaner hose.

Earlier, while waiting in the wings, King looked like a Gen-X Johnny Carson as he repeatedly practiced his golf swing in the air.

When King addressed the audience, his words flowed like nectar.

The professional pitchman and erstwhile host for MTV demonstrated the glib persona of a surfer whose brain obviously is wired by cable modem to his mouth.

"I believe that everyone has a special gift," said King. "If you start using drugs, you'll never uncover that gift."

King, who saw an older brother destroyed by drugs, is a graduate of Muirlands.

"It seems silly to have to tell you guys to stay away from drugs," he said. "I mean, we don't warn you about other obvious things that can hurt you. So, don't stick a hot iron on your face, either. Don't jaywalk in front of a train. Don't do things that can kill you."

The Sundt Memorial Foundation can be reached at 619-551-0523.

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