

# A world away from Hollywood

LARISSA HAM

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New life: Scott Neeson is improving the lives of Cambodia's suffering children.

**Scott Neeson owned a yacht, a Porsche and a mansion next to Cindy Crawford in Los Angeles - but he wasn't happy.**

He owned a yacht, a Porsche and a mansion next to Cindy Crawford in Los Angeles, and was president of one of the world's largest film companies, 20th Century Fox International.

Now, Scott Neeson, who founded the Cambodian Children's Fund in 2004, spends his days wearing crumpled cargo pants, with bags under his eyes and thick boots on his feet, as he wades through ankle-deep sewage, rubbish and syringes on the outskirts of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh.

Six years ago, Mr Neeson, an Adelaide man before his career took him to the US, was moving to a new job at Sony Pictures but, burnt out, first took a holiday in Asia.

Horrified by the level of poverty among Phnom Penh's street children, he paid for a child's schooling, only to find out he had fallen victim to a scam, with nine others having "sponsored" the child. He recalls: "One day, a restaurant owner sat me down and broke the news. He said, 'If you want to see some people who really need help, go down here [to the Steung Meanchey rubbish dump].' "

Visiting those living on and around the tip, which spans eight football fields, is more than 30 metres deep and reeks with the smell of garbage constantly on fire, was like a shot through Mr Neeson's heart.

"It was just . . . I couldn't believe it," he says, still at a loss. "It was even worse back then, too."

Children, many barefoot, walked with dull eyes through the tip, scavenging for recyclables among the broken glass and filthy waste.

Phnom Penh's cheapest spot to live — smack bang on the top of the tip — is a horror, with only ramshackle tents to keep out the elements, and little decent food and no electricity, toilets, education or hope. The ramshackle villages around it, surrounded by a carpet of litter, are barely any better.

"The first time I went, I pulled two kids off the dump and got them into school. It was \$US40 (\$A44) a month. That's what really struck me — how easy it was," Mr Neeson says.

A year after visiting, he resigned from his job and moved to Phnom Penh. "By the time September came around, I had sold my house, sold my worldly goods. I was just focused on getting back."

In June 2004, he leased a building and hired his first Cambodian staff member. "The plan was to get up to 45 kids into an education program."

Mr Neeson knew he had found his purpose. Five years on, he chuckles at that plan. CCF now provides schooling or childcare to 496 children, effectively providing a lifeline out of the tip. About 420 of the children are in full-time accommodation.

There is also a free medical clinic for families, and employment and training programs for parents including a bakery and a garment-making centre.

For Mr Neeson, Phnom Penh, a city that is only one generation on from the brutal Khmer Rouge regime, turned out to be more broken than he could have imagined. On his daily walk through the dump, he still discovers tales of heartbreak and neglect: a six-year-old boy sold into prostitution; two children beaten unconscious; alcohol-affected parents who deliberately burnt their children and others abandoned entirely. Two young girls were reportedly being "groomed" by a man running paid tours.

"I look for kids on their own," Mr Neeson says. "Some of the kids are left there by their parents, who never see them again."

This July, the tip, considered an embarrassment, was

closed. While that has helped the 40 per cent of the 2500 families that could afford to move with a government relocation grant, those remaining, whose livelihood depended on it, are now worse off.

CCF has responded with programs including a nursery and a neo and post-natal program for pregnant women to stem infant mortality rates.

In November, Mr Neeson, who had not had a single day off work since he moved to Phnom Penh, returned to Australia for the first time in many years to visit his family and begin establishing an Australian office.

The charity, which has been reliant on US sponsors, is hoping to encourage more support here by making all Australian donations tax-deductible.

For Mr Neeson, once named one of America's most eligible bachelors, his is now a sometimes lonely life, filled with bouts of depression and exhaustion. It's a far cry from his old reality, in which he hung out with movie stars like Harrison Ford and released blockbusters such as *Titanic*.

"[In America] I just knew that I wasn't happy and I had everything that was supposed to make me happy," he says. "Here, you live and die by the choices you make . . . there's a certain purity I like about this job."

There's also the undeniable joy of improving the lives of the children.