

He was a successful expat Scot enjoying the full Hollywood lifestyle. The LA mansion (with a pool, naturally), Cindy Crawford as a neighbour, a Porsche in the drive and a \$1m salary... until a visit to Cambodia changed his priorities entirely



New lifestyle: Scott Neeson now works to help poor children in Cambodia, left, and finds it a far more fulfilling experience

them up with a small flat, paid for schooling for the girl and her sister and bought a motorbike for their father to start a business.

But that act of charity was no more successful than his first: 'It was a disaster. I went to India and, when I came back four days later, they had sold everything - every stick of furniture and every item of clothing. They said the television set and the motorbike had been stolen.'

The two girls were out of school and back on the streets. As soon as Mr Neeson had left, their parents had claimed back the school fees.

'I realised there was no way of helping the kids unless you had some kind of direct control,' he said. 'With some of the parents, their experience of poverty is so harsh that they can't think beyond the short term, they just think of surviving to the next day.'

'You could literally say to some of the poorer parents, "I'll give you \$100 now or \$1,000 tomorrow" and, in every case, they would take the \$100.'

Over the next year, Mr Neeson returned to Cambodia almost every month, juggling charity work with the demands of running a substantial Sony department in LA. Something had to give and, as colleagues shook their heads in bewilderment, he turned his back on Hollywood for good.

He sold his five-bedroom home in Brentwood, Los Angeles, for \$3.5million and ploughed the cash

'I was in garbage instead of being at the Oscars'

into the launch of the Cambodian Children's Fund. The \$1million-a-year wage was replaced with a starting salary of \$25,000. Today, Mr Neeson pays himself \$75,000 a year and admits he still has funds set aside. But his wealth at 50 is a fraction of what it was at 40.

Some wondered if he had suffered a mid-life crisis. Others thought it was a full-blown nervous breakdown or that the Hollywood high-flyer had simply gone nuts. But, to an unmarried, childless man in his mid-40s, nothing had felt more sane. Seven years on, does he ever wake up in a cold sweat thinking: 'What have I done?'

'I think that quite often, actually - at least once a week, when things start to unravel,' he confesses.

'There was one time when I was down in the garbage dump and I had my foot literally stuck in excrement. I pulled my foot out but my wellie remained stuck. It struck me that at that moment my friends were attending the Oscars as I, too, would have been.'

Yet the rewards to the soul outweigh any material rewards he has ever enjoyed. Today, CCF cares for more than 700 children across five centres and services have recently been extended to provide for their families, too. Later this year, the charity will launch a London office - providing the first opportunity in a decade for Mr Neeson to return to his homeland.

'If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing,' he says. 'I'm in the place I was meant to be, at the time I was meant to be, doing what I was meant to do. Alter any part of the path that led me here and I might never have reached this point.'

'My greatest triumph is seeing the metamorphosis of destitute and neglected children into wonderfully caring, and cared-for, kids. It's an endless source of surprise that they can adjust so quickly. I've had a boat and owned a Porsche and I'm glad I did all that. It's certainly fun - but it's just not very lasting.'

j.brocklebank@daily mail.co.uk
www.cambodianchildrensfund.org

president. Life was a whirlwind of first-class travel, glitzy movie premieres and luxury hotels.

But the trip to Dalbeattie in Kirkcudbrightshire was a break from the norm - in fact the Hollywood film mogul had come to offer the town's people an apology.

He was embarrassed by the film's portrayal of First Officer William Murdoch as a coward who cracked under pressure and opened fire on passengers scrambling on to lifeboats before turning the gun on himself.

In Murdoch's home town of Dalbeattie, he is regarded as a hero.

Mr Neeson arrived with a £5,000 cheque for the local school and some conciliatory words for Mr Murdoch's living relatives. The visit was significant, he says now, because by then he was already beginning to wonder if the lifestyle he had worked so hard to achieve truly suited him.

To the people of Dalbeattie he may have looked like the archetypal movie exec mouthing platitudes for the sake of PR, but inside he was searching for something which no amount of wealth, kudos or material possessions seemed to bring.

'I had this void inside me and I wasn't particularly happy,' he says. 'I had reached the point where the job wasn't giving me nearly the satisfaction that I was expecting. I felt somewhat betrayed by things like advertising... you know, "get your first Mercedes and you'll be happy, you'll have arrived". It just didn't happen for me.'

'I was looking at doing something else because I was conscious there were 1,000 people below you all wanting your job and 10,000

LIFE SWAP

people telling you how lucky you are hanging out with movie stars and all the rest of it. I just wasn't getting a lot of satisfaction out of it. I was beginning to feel much happier being on my own.'

Yet, on the surface, Mr Neeson seemed to operate almost effortlessly in the corporate environment and before long he accepted a new, even more high-powered job, this time as head of Sony Pic-

tures' international marketing. But in the gap between jobs, he set off on a backpacking holiday through Asia. Out of the blue, on a stopover in Cambodia, a means of filling the void presented itself. It was simple human charity.

Not that charity, in a country as fractured as Cambodia, can ever truly be simple. In a cafe in Phnom Penh, he saw a little girl begging for money and handed her a dollar

for a can of Coke. He watched her settle by a tree and drink it happily.

The next night, the girl was back, just as desperate for money: 'It occurred to me that what I'd done didn't actually help very much at all.'

By the following day, he had arranged to meet the girl's mother and determined to get her whole family out of poverty. He fixed

Scots broadcaster Robb, 49, loses battle with MS



Professional: Allan Robb

SCOTS broadcaster Allan Robb has died at the age of 49 following a long battle with multiple sclerosis.

Born in Edinburgh, he was a news presenter on BBC Radio 5 Live for 12 years.

Radio 5 Live colleague Nicky Campbell, who had known Robb since primary school, said: 'It's one of the saddest days of my life.'

'Allan was a great broadcaster and professional and had a quick and agile mind, asking questions that people couldn't hide from.'

Campbell said Robb had been proud of his job at the BBC, adding: 'He used to point up to Broadcasting House and say, "We work there for the BBC". He never forgot that.'

Robb began his career at Aberdeen's Northsound Radio, before moving to BBC Radio 1, where he was a presenter on Newsbeat, and

By Sarah Bruce

then to BBC Scotland. Atholl Duncan, BBC Scotland's head of news and current affairs, said: 'Allan will be fondly remembered by his many colleagues on Reporting Scotland as an extremely professional presenter and a highly skilled and tenacious journalist.'

Allan joined BBC Radio 5 Live in 1994. During his time on the station, he captured an exclusive interview with Nelson Mandela and presented live from Sydney on New Year's Day 2000.

He also reported live from Paris in 2005 on London's successful bid for the 2012 Olympic Games.

Radio 5 Live controller Adrian Van Klaveren said: 'Allan had a quiet authority and a warmth listeners loved. He was a great professional and is a great loss to the industry.'



Hollywood days: Scott Neeson socialised with movie star Harrison Ford

FOR a boy from a tough, working-class area of Edinburgh, Scott Neeson was doing rather nicely. Home was a \$3.5million pad complete with swimming pool in West Los Angeles. A Porsche and a Dodge SUV sat in the drive and his 36ft yacht was berthed at the local marina. Supermodel Cindy Crawford was his next door neighbour and, at poolside parties around the neighbourhood, he would shoot the breeze with A-list stars such as Mel Gibson, Tom Cruise and Harrison Ford.

Work was going pretty well, too. He was a vice-president of 20th Century Fox and pocketed a \$1million-a-year salary for marketing some of the biggest movies of all time. Titanic, Braveheart, Independence Day, X-Men... he oversaw the release of them all.

But Mr Neeson, 51, is not in Hollywood any more. These days he is normally to be found at an enormous rubbish dump in the Cambodian town of Phnom Penh, where hundreds of children scavenge like crows in the stinking heap of waste for anything that might make a few coppers.

The dream movie-industry job is history, along with the house, the pool and the Porsche. And Mr Neeson feels all the richer for it. To the horror of his colleagues, who thought he must be having a nervous breakdown, he decided seven years ago he could no longer work in a corporate environment where the measure of success is the thickness of the wallet, the number of bedrooms in the mansion, the marquee of the Merc.

'I couldn't sleep at night,' he recalled. 'I was tossing and turning and becoming more and more reclusive. I just couldn't imagine being on my death bed and thinking: "Is this my legacy? That I've marketed some very big films?"'

Today, Mr Neeson's legacy looks certain to read rather differently from that of the typical Hollywood hotshot driven by corporate greed. He is the founder of the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF), providing education, food and nursing to the most vulnerable children from the most destitute communities in the country.

The number of lives immeasurably improved by his decision to stop chasing the Hollywood dollar probably runs into thousands. And last week, a vivid example of the challenges faced by an altruistic Scot in a land riven with unscrupulous incomers made international headlines.

Mr Neeson found himself trying to persuade Cambodian Khaeng Sokun



by Jonathan Brocklebank

sua a mother to allow her underage daughter to marry a lascivious pensioner. 'It was a very difficult situation,' said Mr Neeson. 'At first the mother thought I wanted her daughter for myself.'

The disturbing fact is Cambodia is a favoured destination for British paedophiles. For a time, Gary Glitter made the country his home. As Mr Neeson puts it: 'People arrive here for all the wrong reasons. Such a tragic, broken country. People like Fletcher are a continuous source of worry.'

'There is little doubt Fletcher devotes his time here to befriending young girls. He tells their parents he wants to adopt them, care for them. They think because he gives out food he is good. But he is grooming them.'

Yet the girl's 58-year-old mother, who lost her first husband and twin baby daughters in the 'killing fields' of the Khmer Rouge, seems oblivious to the threat Fletcher poses.

'We owe \$600,' she says. 'How else can I pay this off? Dany wants to help her family. Her future husband is a good man. She feels sorry for him. He comes here and gives everybody food.'

Mr Neeson, who has offered the mother an interest-free loan to pay off the debt, said: 'You really want the mother to take some responsibility. She's going to back herself into a corner because I don't believe this guy Fletcher will be around much longer.'

'The Ministry of the Interior and the police are investigating him. I've also had a fast response from the British Ambassador Andrew Mace, who seems genuinely concerned.'

The journey which took Mr Neeson from downtrodden Gracemount in Edinburgh to the Stung Mean rubbish dump in Cambodia is a truly remarkable and inspiring one. The first upheaval came when his family emigrated to Elizabeth, South Australia, when he was five.

There, in early adulthood, he managed to break into the Australian film industry before winning a move to Los Angeles, where he worked his way up to one of the powerful jobs in the movie industry.

Yet Mr Neeson always considered himself a Scot - and a working-class one at that - and would return to Edinburgh regularly to visit relatives and go on holiday to Skye.

By the time he flew into Scotland in 1998 following the release of the film Titanic - at the time the biggest-grossing movie in history - he was 20th Century Fox's executive vice-

'We owe \$600. How else can I pay this off?'

not to accept \$200 from Englishman David Fletcher for her 17-year-old daughter Dany's hand in marriage.

Fletcher, originally from Essex, is 65 and has served a jail sentence in Britain for the statutory rape of a 15-year-old girl. He had offered her £250, plied her with champagne and shot a video as they had sex.

After his release from jail, he travelled to Cambodia, where he now masquerades as a charity worker. In fact, he is grooming girls for sex.

Mr Neeson said: 'I was concerned about Dany's absence from our English classes, especially as her house abuts the school - her mother is the caretaker. The issue of Fletcher came to light when someone from that community passed on the info that Dany was marrying an older foreigner.'

'I was sent a photo of the two of them and recognised Fletcher. This sort of incident is why we have some degree of presence within each community or village, mostly regular CCF staff who reside there.'

Mr Neeson went to see her mother in her shack in Damnak Thom Village No 1 to discover she was \$600 in debt and planning to use the \$200 'dowry' from Fletcher to pay some off some of what she owed.

The sum would barely be considered beer money in Mr Neeson's former life. Here it was enough to per-

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