

Issue 45 | March/April 2009

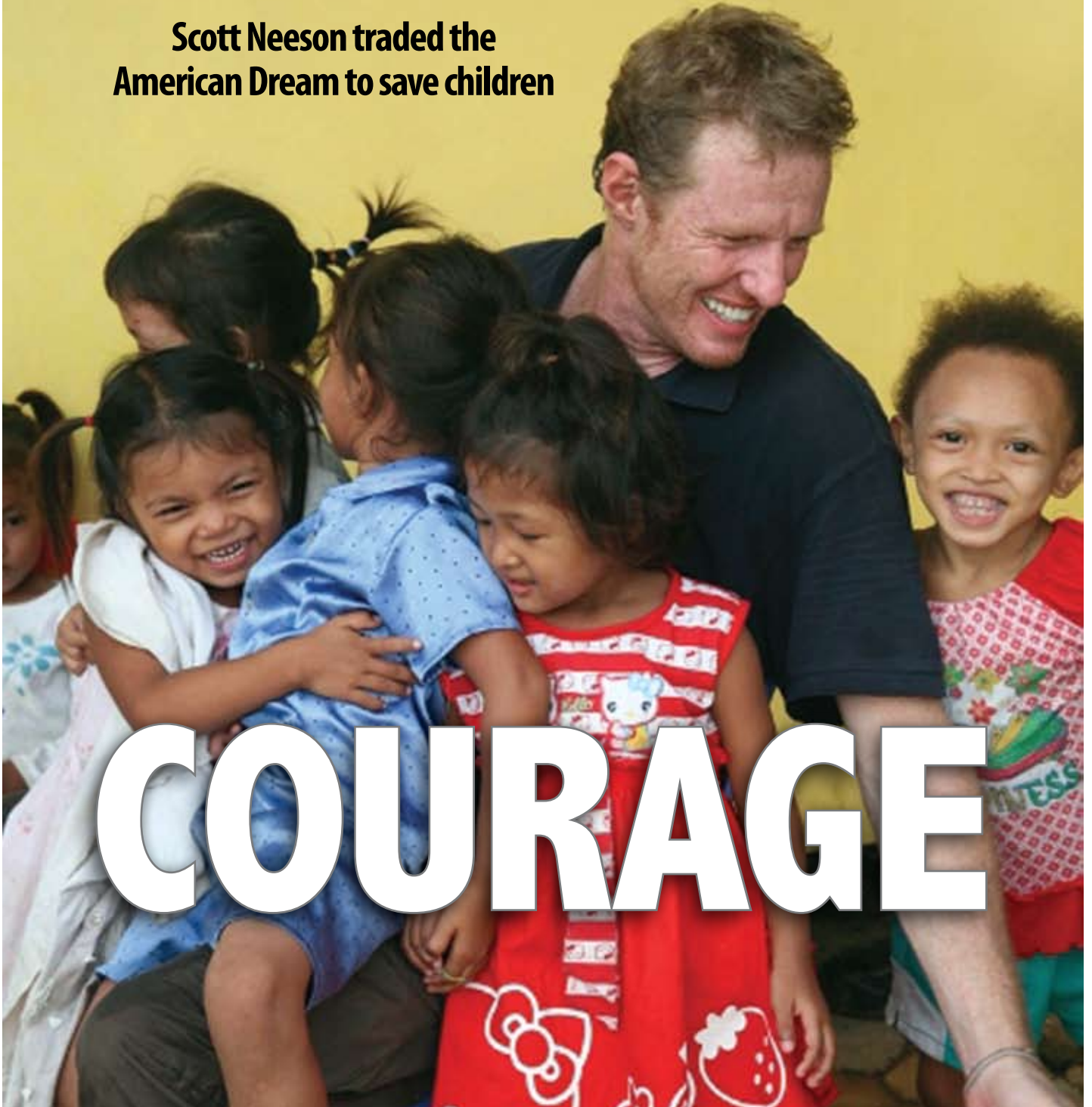
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# THE JOURNEY

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A Mind, Body and Soul Connection

**Scott Neeson traded the  
American Dream to save children**





Scott Neeson's Cambodian Children's Fund provides 400 children with food, housing and medical treatment.

# Heeding An Inner Voice

Hollywood mogul swaps fantasy life, serves children living a nightmare

By TC Brown

**H**our upon hour, tiny Panya spent her days combing through mountains of toxic, foul-smelling rubbish littered with broken glass, treasure hunting for recyclables to sell. The work and deadly surroundings eventually exacted a physical and emotional toll. Painful skin lesions erupted all over her body and the little girl spent a significant part of each day sobbing uncontrollably.

Tola, little more than a waif, was a chronic garbage collector planted on the mounds of trash every day by her drunken father. Rooting through discarded hazardous chemicals and broken syringes, Tola became a despondent human scavenger.

Wretched stories indeed, but there is a happy ending for these two little Cambodian girls, thanks to Scott Neeson and the organization he created, the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF). See [www.cambodianchildrensfund.org](http://www.cambodianchildrensfund.org).

Panya, now a healthy youngster basking in the care of an older sister, is

inspired and delighted by her art. She has exchanged daily cascades of tears for laughter and singing. Tola now thrives and is at the top of her class. In January, she earned a black belt in karate. Both are permanently off of the massive, rotting Steung Meanchey garbage dump near Phnom Penh.

This story is as much about all of the impoverished youngsters who live on the Cambodian landfill as it is about Neeson. For in reality they are fused in a symbiotic relationship. Neeson and the children thrive, finding courage in one another, because of their connectedness.

In 2004, Neeson abandoned his American Dream life suffused with glitz, glamour and razzle-dazzle. He traded it for garbage – literally. In creating the CCF, Neeson left a domain that is the epitome of the fantasy life, choosing instead to cross the threshold into a world where multitudes live out a nightmare.

Neeson, the former president of 20th Century Fox International and a senior

executive vice president for Sony Pictures International, had everything that defines the jet-setting high life. The accoutrements included a five-bedroom Hollywood Hills mansion, a 36-foot yacht, a Porsche and an SUV, a closet full of Armani suits and an address book brimming with celebrated A-listed Hollywood stars and starlets.

But Neeson tossed his 26-year film career overboard and moved to Cambodia. He set up a shelter for 45 poverty-stricken children who were laboring to eke out a bare-bones existence in the living hell that is the Steung Meanchey garbage dump.

Now, the 49-year-old Neeson spends his days slogging through the stomach-churning stink of a slime-and-gunk filled Third World dump that stretches over 11-acres and is 100-feet deep in waste, debris and detritus.

The landfill is a mountainous jumble of smashed glass, degrading paper, discarded plastic, rotting food, hospital and human waste, jettisoned chemicals, pesticides and other toxins, body parts and fetuses. The rubbish spews waves of methane that ignites fires that burn for weeks, framing an apocalyptic tableau.

"The combination produces a smell that is unique to this particular circle of hell," Neeson says in a phone interview from Phnom Penh. "Once you get into it, the smell gets into you, to your clothes, your hair, your head.

"After an hour there, your throat will burn and you can be pleasantly surprised if you don't end up with a cough," he says. "Longer stays bring longer and sicker penalties. It's a wonder how the kids and the families even stand it. It gave me two bouts of pneumonia in the past six months."

But Neeson is driven because the needs of so many children are so great. He estimates that for every 100 kids he sees, 70 cope with perilous life situations and are in need of some form of immediate aid. The CCF now shelters and educates more than 400 kids.

A humble Neeson is quick to deflect any suggestion that it took courage for him to give up the opulent Tinsel Town lifestyle to serve others.

"I think it was almost fear more than courage," Neeson says. "I didn't want

## You Can Help

Donations to the CCF can help expand its 21 programs to reach even more needy Cambodian children and families.

Donors can make a one-time contribution or be part of a unique sponsorship program that helps support a child for a year. See [www.cambodianchildrensfund.org/donate.html](http://www.cambodianchildrensfund.org/donate.html)

CCF cannot accept items like clothing, shoes or toys due to Cambodian Customs regulations and the costs to process and distribute the goods. Classroom materials are welcome, however, and a list of needs can be found at the link listed above.

The organization also considers bulk donations on a case-by-case basis and is currently reviewing needs for medications and first-aid products, multivitamins and children's books.

CCF does not sell, trade or distribute donor information except as required by law.

to be 70-years old and look back and regret my life. I wanted to feel good about what contributions I could give."

Neeson likes to say he's had three lives. The first began light years away from the bright stage lights of Hollywood. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, his family moved to Australia when he was five years old. He was raised in a hot, dry, tough industrial town of Elizabeth, about an hour north of Adelaide, in southern Australia.

His father worked for the Australian Department of Defense and his mother cleaned. Presciently perhaps, in his first job Neeson delivered posters for a cinema company.

"When I started, I still had the words of one of my teachers in my ears, 'I

know boys and I know you'll never amount to anything,'" Neeson says.

Eventually, Neeson ended up in the U.S., landing in Brentwood to begin a career in the film business.

Neeson rose through the ranks, securing top-of-the-food-chain jobs with 20th Century Fox and later Sony Pictures. He oversaw the release of many blockbuster films including, "Star Wars," "Braveheart," "Titanic," "Independence Day" and "X-Men."

But the superficial nature of Hollywood's culture began to weigh heavily. A once muted inner voice that nagged Neeson about a more meaningful life grew louder and more insistent over time.

"It was wearing off. There became an awareness that material things are superficial and that what you own ends up owning you," Neeson says. "You are chasing everyone else's dreams. There are 100 people below you who want your job."

That badgering interior voice erupted into a scream in 2003 at a Mexican Yoga retreat led by Seane Corn, a prominent Yoga instructor Neeson had taken classes from in Los Angeles.

"Scott was always the typical Type A personality," Corn says. "He would do extra pushups between poses and leave sometimes before class ended.

"I knew he was very successful and had a high-powered Hollywood job," Corn says.

At a retreat in Maya Tulum, Mexico, Corn says she was "prattling on about love or forgiveness" when she looked up at Neeson and saw him crying.

"His body was shaking. He was clearly in distress," Corn says. "I've seen people do this a million times, but I did not expect to see Scott like this."

Corn and Neeson trekked the beach for 2 1/2-hours afterward. Neeson told her he hated his life and his job. He felt there was no purpose or meaning to anything he did. He told her he thought he needed to quit.

"I took this very, very seriously. It was a massive revelation," Corn says. "But I thought he would go back to LA, write a big fat check to some organization and then get caught up in the Hollywood process all over again."

But Neeson didn't choose the

## A Light in a World of Misery

Cambodia maintains the dubious distinction of having one of the highest rates of child prostitution and domestic violence in the world, making life a living hell for many of the country's children.

The CCF is one of Cambodia's success stories. The organization has grown from one facility to five, serving more than 400 children who are fed, housed, treated for medical issues and educated. The school program is recognized as one of the best in the country, and lessons include vocational training.

Many of the children suffer from significant health problems when they first arrive at CCF, especially those who worked the Steung Meanchey garbage dump. Lice, scabies and intestinal worms infect many of the kids, and others suffer from serious diseases like hepatitis A and B, tuberculosis and HIV.

CCF provides 24-hour access to in-house health care, examinations by specialists and hospitalization if needed.

The CCF also takes its works out into the community, including the delivery of food and fresh water to families every day, an essential service in conditions where 80 percent of illnesses are water related.

The CCF strives to promote self sufficiency in order to splinter the generational cycles of poverty and abuse. Students are encouraged to foster independent thought, explore self-expression and grow as humanitarians to better understand and find solutions for the problems that plague Cambodia.

conventional route. Instead, he took a five-week backpacking trip to Southeast Asia and, unbeknownst to him at the time, unearthed his life's purpose in Phnom Penh.

### Nervous Breakthrough

Neeson, emotionally moved by the scores of children begging in the street in Cambodia's capital, began doling out cash. He put up money to sponsor a family whose daughter begged, getting them an apartment and putting her in school.

Soon after, he discovered that the very next day those parents pulled the child from school and gambled away Neeson's cash. A riverside cafe owner pulled him aside and explained the facts of life on the streets of Phnom Penh – begging was a scam perpetrated by adults who pocketed the take.

The next day the cafe owner took Neeson to the enormous Steung Meanchey garbage dump near the

capital, a steaming gumbo of waste and rubbish so toxic that rats refuse to take up residence. A putrid, rotten-egg smell assaulted Neeson's nostrils more than a mile from the landfill. The Cambodian government estimates that 1,200 families live on the dump either permanently or in transit. Neeson saw hundreds of children scrambling over and crawling through the mounds of decaying garbage.

"My goodness, it was like getting hit in the back of the head," Neeson says. "It was the most appalling thing I had ever seen and it was shattering to me to see how people lived there."

That very day Neeson arranged for three children to move away from the landfill. He found them a place to stay and he got them enrolled in school.

"It was so easy to do," Neeson says. "I never realized how easy it was to change these kids' lives. That's when I started thinking."

Neeson's keen business sense kicked into gear and he calculated that \$60 a month could provide decent shelter for a child.

"I went back to Hollywood and couldn't get it out of my mind," Neeson says. "I saw things for what they were. I was always told that true happiness would come when you own this luxurious house, but I realized it's not about consumer stuff."

Over the next year, Neeson traveled back to Cambodia for a week each month. Then, he sold his possessions, packed his bags and moved to Phnom Penh to establish the CCF. He opened a single shelter for a handful of children in critical need.

Tinsel Town rumors flew and some thought he had gone off the deep end, says Corn, Neeson's Yoga teacher.

"Many thought it was a nervous breakdown," Corn says. "But he had a nervous breakthrough."

Neeson's organization expanded over the next four years and it now houses about 365 kids, while another 65 attend classes.

The children are schooled in local language and English. Classes include reading, writing, social studies and math. Cultural lessons teach the kids traditional Khmer music, drama and dance. They receive vocational training covering computer skills, cosmetology, hair-dressing, graphic design and even restaurant management.

The kids learn to design clothes and in sewing classes they turn out handbags made from material recovered from the dump.

In 2006, CCF opened the Star Bakery to train the children how to bake nutritionally-enhanced bread, maintain sanitary facilities and manage the business. They turn out 175 loaves per day, with the majority going to families who live on the dump.

The CCF also runs community-based programs, opening up avenues to education and providing health care in partnership with Hope worldwide. They deliver food and safe drinking water to the community daily.

"We help supply nets to keep out the mosquitoes and tarpaulins to keep out the rain," Neeson says. "We have childcare, maternal assistance, social

workers and even the musical instruments our kids need to help them keep in touch with – and keep alive – their own culture.”

### Rising from the Rubble

The CCF relies on private donors for the lion’s share of its financial support. The organization’s annual budget stands at about \$1.2 million.

The CCF has enough money on hand for about a year, Neeson says, but the state of the world’s economy is worrisome. Ironically, the economic climate has even impacted garbage scavengers who once earned \$2 a day for recyclables but are now lucky to get 40 cents.

“We think that there will be tough financial times ahead,” he says. “How we’ll fare we don’t know, but we can’t afford to fail.”

Recently, Joseph Mussomeli, a former U.S. ambassador to Cambodia, explained to ABC News the extent of the difficulties plaguing the country.

“This country is so broken,” Mussomeli said. “It has been 30-to-40 years of a nightmare – genocide, civil war, foreign invasions, rampant corruption. Anyone who has had any education has been annihilated.”

Neeson sees his work as critical to helping lift the Cambodian community “out of the rubble.” Others, including Mussomeli, agree, recognizing Neeson’s program as one of the country’s few bright spots.

In 2007, Neeson won the first ever “Q Prize,” an international award created by Quincy Jones and the Harvard School of Public Health for extraordinary leadership in advocacy for children. Last year, the Ambassadors for Children gave Neeson the Peace Award for his service to the abused and abandoned children of Cambodia.

CCF has aided countless needy children like Lyda, a teenage girl whose parents abandoned her at the dump when she was five. Lyda worked 13-hour days on the piles of garbage, scratching out a meager existence.

It was rougher on her than most. She suffered from a severe spine curvature known as scoliosis. Neeson took her to Los Angeles and with the aid of media mogul and Viacom chief Sumner Redstone, got one of the world’s top orthopedic surgeons to successfully operate. Lyda’s spine is now straight and she is able to walk normally.

Neeson hasn’t a clue about how long he will continue. He wants to do everything he can to ensure that as many children as possible are educated, self sufficient and become productive, socially-conscious citizens

who care about their neighbors.

“People who think about community and who are willing and able to help build it and reshape their own country,” Neeson explains. “When that day will come, I just don’t know.”

In February, Corn, Neeson’s LA yogi, led 20 people to Cambodia to work for two weeks at CCF. Each first had to raise \$20,000 to cover expenses and provide additional aid to the organization.

Corn raves about Neeson and his work, calling him a living example of someone who opened their heart to truth and then let truth take the lead.

“He had no experience or skill in this, but he had passion in his heart,” Corn says. “He stepped into the unknown with so much incredible faith. He was more committed to following that passion than his fears.

“That requires so much courage and faith,” Corn says. “Scott demonstrates both, dramatically.”

Daily trips to the Steung Meanchey garbage dump was not the path Neeson would have predicted during his heyday film industry days. He acknowledges he had an exceptional lifestyle in Hollywood. But that was then.

“I had a good life. I had the boat – and I just loved being out in that – and the big house and the dogs and the good times,” Neeson says. “Of course I loved it all, but regrets? No. None.”

