

From Elizabeth via Hollywood ...

Scott, the slum dump millionaire

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AS far as American dreams go, it doesn't get much better than this. In the ultimate rags to riches story, Scott Neeson went from high school dropout to the heights of Tinseltown as president of 20th Century Fox International.

The bachelor was living next to Cindy Crawford in a mansion in the Hollywood Hills, counted Harrison Ford among his friends, boasted a 10m yacht, a Porsche, glamorous girlfriends, designer clothes, a red-carpet social life ... you get the picture?

But what happened next could have been snatched from the script of a movie blockbuster.

In 2004, the film mogul traded a razzle-dazzle world built on escapism for the harshest of all realities – the slums of Cambodia.

Neeson, 50, has dedicated the past five years to rescuing children living on and around a huge toxic dump from poverty, abuse and illness.

"I used to drive a Porsche and attend the Academy Awards, now I have head lice and go to a dump," laughs the founder of the Cambodian Children's Fund, as he swats away a fly at the Steung Meanchey landfill.

The day we meet him, he is slightly distracted: he has not had a day off in five years, he's exhausted, and suffering yet another bout of pneumonia.

But that's not why he's troubled. He is reeling from the devastating news of the death of a baby he had saved from extreme neglect.

Baby Dany's mother died shortly after childbirth, and she suffered malnutrition and muscle atrophy at the hands of relatives.

Now she too was dead, on her first birthday, after her family removed her from CCF's care. "I'm sorry. I'm

He grew up in Adelaide's northern suburbs, then carved a successful career path to the glitz and glamour of Hollywood. Now, Scott Neeson has given it all up to help children living in unimaginable squalor, as founder of the Cambodian Children's Fund. *Sunday Mail* reporter **ELISSA DOHERTY** and photographer **ANDREA LAUBE** travelled to Cambodia to see him tramp through a heaving rubbish dump and save lives in the capital, Phnom Penh



A-LISTER: Scott Neeson, during his Hollywood days, with Harrison Ford

not myself today," he says, rubbing his forehead.

"I hate it when this happens. We tried so hard to save her. It just was so unnecessary."

Sadly, her story is not unique. Pulling on gumboots, he sashes through the mud into the nightmarish slums that baby Dany, and thousands of other children, are forced to endure.

In Phnom Penh, there's poor .T. then there's the Steung Meanchey community.

Words can't describe the bleakness. Its inhabitants live in the shadow of the smoking dump that they, until recently, have relied on for their livelihood. Thousands of people, in-

cluding young children, eked out a grim existence, picking through medical waste, corpses, foetuses, decaying food scraps and dangerous sinkholes for recyclables to sell. The ankle-deep mud beneath their crude huts is a putrid soup of rubbish and detritus scavenged from the dump, rotting food, soiled clothes, excrement (there are no toilets) and other human waste.

Families share a tiny room on wooden stilts with tarpaulins for roofs, with the simple stove for cooking often causing respiratory illness.

"Take me to school," children plead to Neeson in Khmer, but there are more than 200 already on the waiting list. The most shocking conditions,

however, are invisible. Gambling and alcohol abuse are prolific, and he estimates 90 per cent of the families live with domestic violence.

He leans over a little girl with painful scabs on her head and glazed eyes, and asks: "Are you OK?"

Then adds: "She doesn't look right, does she?"

With bare feet and dressed in sarongs, the mothers start to swarm, knowing a visit by Neeson may well mean rice vouchers. He hands out as many as he can.

"I don't get shocked any more; I get depressed," he says as he looks around.

"There are so many sick and abused kids. There have been instances of

children being brought to CCF after being beaten unconscious."

Behind them, the 11ha mountain of rubbish blows dangerous fumes through their overcrowded alleyways and into their lungs.

It was the sight of the tip which provided the twist to the Scott Neeson script in 2003.

Burnt-out and desperate for a break before moving to a high-flying role with Sony Pictures, he had taken a five week sabbatical to Asia.

Planning only a brief stop-off in Cambodia's afflicted capital, he checked into the flashy Raffles Hotel.

But he was so shocked and moved by the masses of kids begging on the streets, his itinerary – and his future – changed for ever.

He started to help as many well-intentioned but naive visitors do – buying street kids soft drinks, paying for them to go to school, and sponsoring an entire family.

He was, however, getting scammed – and it was the best thing that could have happened.

A local cafe owner intervened and offered to take him to a hellish place where he "could really help": the Steung Meanchey dump.

"It's the worst place on earth," he says.

"This was one of the poorest communities in the world and one of the most toxic.

"But not just the squalor – it's the human degradation and lack of hope. The environment was so dire I couldn't walk away."

THE dump recently closed, presenting a new challenge for about 1400 families who have remained in the community. About 40 per cent were relocated with government help, but they had to save enough for a land deposit.

With no income – however meagre – to rely on, the rest are getting increasingly desperate. And they are hungry, so hungry. CCF's emergency food program has increased from two tonnes a month to five tonnes. The fund has developed new programs to try to help parents into employment, but the need is never-ending.

In a world of cynics, one of the biggest questions Neeson fields is: why does he do it?

His upbringing in working-class Elizabeth may go some way towards an explanation.

He says, despite indulging in the excesses of Hollywood, he never truly felt comfortable in a materialism-worshipping world.

Born in Scotland and moving to Australia at age five, Neeson quit high school at the age of 16. His career in the film biz began aged 19, delivering posters for South Australia's old Starline drive-ins.

After stints with Greater Union in programming, and Hoyts where he became managing director, he went on to spend 10 years with Fox in Hollywood.

There he oversaw films including *Titanic*, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, *Speed*, *Independence Day*, *Braveheart*, and *X-Men*, and mingled with the likes of Mel Gibson, Steven Spielberg, Tom Cruise, and even



TOUGH LOVE: A young woman (above) raises her baby in a lean-to on top of the disease-ridden Steung Meanchey dump

SHANTY TOWN: No electricity, running water or toilets ... conditions are grim for this toddler (right) growing up in a slum next to the Steung Meanchey dump





MR POPULAR: Scott Neeson is surrounded as he hands out rice vouchers (above left)

DEPRESSING: Inspecting the appalling conditions a family was living in on top of the dump (above)

HAPPY MEAL: Neeson joins day care centre children for their favourite part of the day - lunch (left)

Prince Charles. Ironically, it was here, where he had everything, that he realised something was missing. "Being head of international at Fox was a mistake in terms of job satisfaction," he says. "I couldn't believe it, when I left Phnom Penh I didn't want to go back to the film business. "In the US you are constantly led to believe that with some new material goods you will find happiness.

It's bull - - - t. I realised it before I got here but really this gave me clarity. I miss much of it but I have no regrets. I feel this is what I was meant to do. "I finally feel challenged." His initial plan was to get 45 children into an education program. Thanks to his big heart and strong business acumen it has mushroomed into five separate facilities, where more than 400 children receive

nutrition and housing as well as medical treatment, dental services, vaccinations, vocational training, job placement and a strong education. The comprehensive educational program includes local language reading and writing, English, social studies, maths and traditional Khmer music, dance and drama. They also provide community relief programs to give suffering families better access to education,

health care, food assistance and safe drinking water. Believing the generational cycle of poverty and abuse can only be broken through self-sufficiency, he aims to give the children a sense of hope, dignity and respect for themselves and others. He recently set up a factory making trendy bags - which have celebrity endorsement - and hired 35 of the children's mothers. But de-

spite a little black book crammed with A-list names, his connections haven't helped as much as many would think. Hollywood stars are inundated by charities wanting them to help and friendships in La-La Land are notoriously fleeting. Child sponsorship only makes up a third of the CCF's income and it relies on private donations for its \$1.7 million annual budget. In recognition of his extraordinary leadership in advocacy for children, Neeson in 2007 was awarded the inaugural Harvard School of Public Health "Q Prize". It's even more inspirational when he admits he never even liked children before. "If there were two kids on the plane next to me I would ask to change seats," he says. Now, when Neeson makes his regular visits to the CCF facilities, it is as if Tom Cruise himself has walked in.

AT CCF's day care centre, children ambush him with hugs and hellos. He knows each of their names and their stories. All have had a tough life. "This is little Srey," he says, spinning a cute toddler around as she laughs with glee. "She has HIV." The shadow that has crossed his face darkens at the nursery, where babies slowly swing in mini-hammocks. Baby Nari, he explains, was born a victim of foetal alcohol syndrome. His father threw him against the wall, the mother had sold the baby formula for booze and he was barely clinging to life when brought to CCF. But today Nari is thriving, healthy and happy. For Neeson, his incredible life change is not without personal sacrifice. "I have my down times, but you deal with it," he says. "It's a very lonely existence. I used to have a dazzling social life and glamorous girlfriends. Now it's a more solo journey." So is it worth it? "Last week, we sent 31 children from day care to school for the first time," he says. "These were children who two years ago were on the dump, all beaten and bruised. To see them in their uniforms, in the tuk tuks... you can't compare that feeling, that accomplishment, with anything I'd ever done in the film business." The Australian chapter of the Cambodian Children's Fund will be launched in Australia next month. **For details on how to sponsor a child or donate, go to cambodianchildrensfund.org**

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