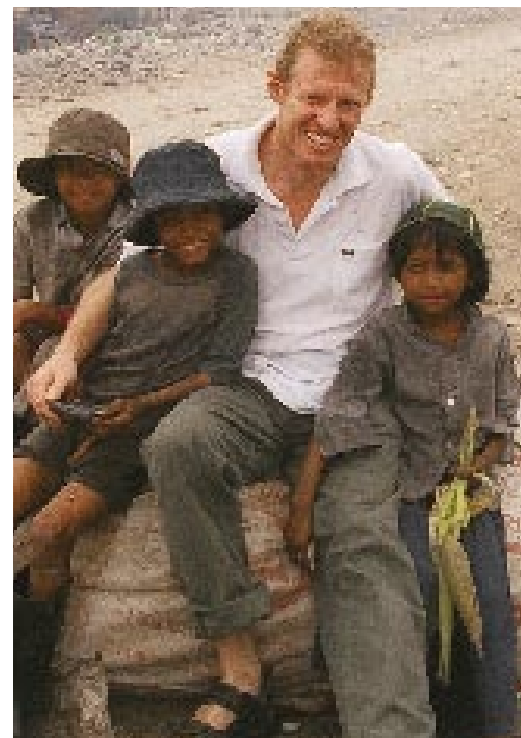


## PEOPLE: INTERNATIONAL



Clockwise from left: Neeson with some of the children his charity has helped in Phnom Penh, Cambodia; smiles all round with a trio of youngsters; Neeson in the 'old' days, meeting Prince Charles; with Harrison Ford; with Mel Gibson; and with Tom Cruise



# NEESON CELEBRATES HIS TRUE CALLING

When Scott Neeson left Hollywood, shortly before Christmas 2004, he kicked the town's rumour mill into overdrive. By FIONNUALA HALLIGAN

The last job Scott Neeson held in LA was senior executive vice-president of marketing at Sony; prior to that, the Australian native spent 14 years with Twentieth Century Fox, latterly as president of international.

But he was not leaving to start a production label, direct, or even run a film festival: Neeson left his five-bedroom house, Porsche, SUV and yacht to move, effectively, to a garbage dump in Cambodia's Phnom Penh and dedicate himself full time to the children's charity he had set up there a year previously.

"The rumours were crazy," says Neeson, 18 months into his new life, having successfully opened his second Phnom Penh facility last month. "The first I heard was that it was a cunning new career strategy — that I was coming back. Then, that I was crazy — that I was a paedophile. I heard it all. My friends knew what I was doing, though, and believed in me."

Those friends include Fox joint CEO Jim Gianopulos: "He gets it," says Neeson, who held the last Cambodian Children's Fund charity event in his house. Other Hollywood friends — "I'm not sure whether they want to be named" — have written "decent-sized" cheques. "It's humbling," he says.

Certainly, life is different now for Neeson. For a

start, "I haven't had a night's sleep since I worked in the film business," he laughs. But on a serious note, he now needs 24-hour security after the manageress of one of his facilities was the victim of an acid attack to the face late last year. It could have been child traffickers; it could have been disgruntled employees. But it was a message, and it is better to be safe.

Neeson currently looks after 155 young children, 85 per cent of whom come from the Steong Meanchey rubbish dump on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. By mid-May, he hopes that number will rise to 200, due to the opening of the charity's second facility, which is largely dedicated to education and vocational training — a mix of English lessons, hairdressing, make-up, garment work, basic computing — providing enough skills to make them employable. Neeson runs the charity himself, with one full-time volunteer, and 34 local Cambodians work there, 16 of them part-time teachers.

Make no mistake, says Neeson, the families they try to help are "the poorest of the poor". There is no way out of the dump for them; the children can make 25-75 cents a day subsistence scavenging, and the families often cannot afford to lose that income — his biggest problem is persuading the parents to let him take care of their children.

But many have been abandoned or are "looked after" by distant relatives and as such are attractive to traffickers; "there's a tendency to steal the kids or for the parents to sell them" to prostitution rings, says Neeson, who recounts some harrowing events involving children who have been sold to brothels or beaten to a pulp. Despite Neeson's efforts, one child — a three-year-old girl — is still scavenging with a fractured arm in a dump where health issues are paramount. "The mother needs the money," says Neeson. "She's not a bad woman. The ones I have the most issues with are the ones who beat their children."

Neeson first encountered the Steong Meanchey garbage dump on a five-week break between jobs at Fox and Sony; while on his travels, he'd been trying to help some street kids in Phnom Penh but "got ripped off blind — I'd give their mothers \$100 and a bag of clothes and they'd keep it and sell it on. Then I'd try to pay for their education, and the minute I left they'd withdraw the child and keep the money. A local took me out to the dump; it's the apocalypse, it really is."

Neeson went back to Hollywood to fulfil his contract but could not forget what he had seen. He returned 11 times over the course of a year. He rented the first facility by remote, sent money, but realised "things don't work when you're not there. Then you realise that a child has gone, been sold into prostitution, because you're not there. But being the age I was — I'm 47 now — I didn't want to do anything impulsive in mid-life. It's also hard to believe you're unhappy in the film business; you have the job that everyone wants. But this is better than buying a toupee."

Now he knows he'll never go back but his old life has come in handy in Cambodia, "one of the most corrupt countries in the world".

"I used to deal with some very difficult personalities in the film business and those skills are incredibly helpful here. You're expected to be ambitious in Hollywood, everyone is there, and I'm ambitious here too," says Neeson, who wants to open a third facility in July and has plans for projects that include building water systems and opening a bakery (with vital nutrients baked into the bread). Eventually, he wants to mount a similar project

in Burma (Myanmar).

Costs at the Cambodian Children's Fund are low; \$17,000 a month for the first facility, \$5,100 for the second. Most of the money is raised through direct, interactive sponsorship of the children for \$100 a month. Neeson initially ploughed his own money into it; he does not draw a salary and admits he has become "shameless" about asking for help.

And, if anyone else is looking for a different kind of fulfilment this week, he says: "I'd love to get one or two people over here to help out. And yes, it's like nothing you've ever seen. But those kids — it's incredible. You can see it on their faces within the space of three months. And I've never before in my life seen anyone so happy as they are."

www.cambodianchildrensfund.org

