

To Cambodia, With Love

Meet the Hollywood mogul who left a life of luxury to give some of the world's poorest children help, hope—and new purpose. **By Shannon Sexton**



More than 1,200 children live and work on a toxic garbage dump in Phnom Penh.



When millionaire movie executive Scott Neeson took a backpacking trip through Cambodia in 2003, he didn't expect to land on a garbage dump. What he saw on the outskirts of Phnom Penh changed his life: hundreds of children—some as young as three years old—somber, sick, smeared in grime, scavenging for recyclables in the smoky wasteland of Steung Meanchey, a toxic dump site that spans eight football fields and is more than 100 feet deep.

Abandoned, orphaned, or sent here to work by their families, these children toil for 12 hours a day or longer, earning about 30¢—enough for a bowl of rice. They scorch their feet on smoldering garbage as they wade through hospital and industrial waste, shards of glass, used condoms, rancid food, and feces. Pimps lurk at the edge of the dump, hoping to lure them into brothels. Their parents—if they have any—are the youngest survivors of the blood-drenched era of the Khmer Rouge; alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence are woven into the fabric of their everyday lives. The most heartbreaking statistic? Only 27 percent of these children survive.

Few of us would consider selling our house, our car, our cherished possessions, and moving here—to one of the most polluted places on the planet, shrouded in smog so thick it coats the taste buds and sears the lungs; a place where flies rise up in black clouds and children are run over by garbage trucks.

Even fewer of us would fund schools for these children with our own money or work long days and weekends with no end in sight, fortified only by the knowledge that we're making a difference.

Scott Neeson did.

This is the story of a man who had everything—and left it all behind. >>

In five short years, Scott has opened four schools and a community center; launched successful vocational programs for young adults; established one of the best health-care programs in Cambodia; and created a subsidized food and clean water program for hundreds of Steung Meanchey children and their families. The mission of his nonprofit Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF) is "to create positive change in Cambodia through intervention and education of the most impoverished children and their families" and to break the devastating cycle of poverty and abuse that has prevailed since the Khmer Rouge.

Man on a Mission

Scott Neeson was a jet-setting executive in Los Angeles who oversaw the release of more than 100 films, including *Titanic*, *Star Wars*, *Braveheart*, *Independence Day*, and *X-Men*. He hung out with stars like Tom Cruise and Harrison Ford. Cindy Crawford was his neighbor. As his yoga teacher, Seane Corn, recalls: "He was a young millionaire living the American dream. He had a yacht, a mansion, a Porsche, the girls. A typical type A executive, he would come to class and do extra push-ups between poses."

Despite his wealth and success, Scott says, he was "never particularly

At the time, Scott was preparing to leave his job as president of 20th Century Fox International to accept a top position at Sony Pictures. But first, he took a backpacking trip through Southeast Asia to clear his head. During a two-day stopover in Phnom Penh, he was overwhelmed by the plight of the ubiquitous street kids, many of whom would run up to him naked, begging for money or food. He stayed for four weeks, trying to help. "I started giving

fill his one-year contract with Sony, he was not the same. The Hollywood drama—actresses who demand to know the thread count on their seats, co-stars who refuse to share a private jet to Europe—seemed "totally obscene," he says, when families are trying to survive on a toxic garbage dump half a world away. He began to have nightmares. The man once dubbed "Mr. Hollywood" came from a world where you can fix anything with money



"THESE ARE CHILDREN OF POL POT SURVIVORS. THIS IS A NATION OF PTSD. WE WANT TO MAKE A NEW GENERATION." —SCOTT NEESON

happy." He knew something was missing in his life, but couldn't put his finger on it. During a yoga retreat with Seane in 2003, Scott had a revelation. While coaching the students through a long hold of pigeon pose, Seane remembers noticing that Scott's body was shaking and he was in tears—a common phenomenon in her classes, but not one she expected to see in Scott. "Scott asked me to take a walk with him after class, and he told me he hated his life. There was no purpose or meaning in anything he was doing."

them money and clothes so they could go to school, thinking I was saving their lives."

But he quickly realized he was getting ripped off. "Their parents take them out of school because they make so much money on the street. It was a restaurant owner who worked near the riverside area of Phnom Penh, where the street kids are, who took me to the garbage dump.

"It shattered my world. It was like walking into the apocalypse."

When Scott returned to LA to ful-

and focused ambition. He knew he could help.

Scott traveled to Phnom Penh 11 times that year, laying plans for a residential school for some of the Steung Meanchey children. He rented a building and sent money from Los Angeles, but learned some hard lessons along the way. Desperate parents, focused on surviving another day, would take their kids out of school to work in the dump, or in harrowing cases, sell them to the pimps. "You can't really do it from a distance," he says. "You have to

Previous spread: Children at dump; Per-Anders Pettersson / Getty Images; Scott and Child: Courtesy of Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF); This spread: Adi Carter with child: Seane Corn; Images of Panya and Nary: Courtesy of CCF; Other images: Courtesy of Off the Mat, Into the World



Clockwise: Scott Neeson and Seane Corn visit Steung Meanchey. Panya suffered from illness and abuse; now she enjoys creative projects at CCF. Fund-raiser Adi Carter helps a child into new clothes. Nary picked garbage at night; now she's in third grade.

be part of the community to be productive and effective.”

He told PBS the real turning point came when, during a visit to Cambodia, he received an “emergency” call from LA. “My phone rang, and it was my office, and the actor who was on tour was having quite a serious meltdown because the private jet didn’t have the right amenities for him. He didn’t want to get on the jet.” The actor was quoted as saying, “My life wasn’t meant to be this difficult.”

“And I thought, I don’t want this to be my world. This isn’t my reality anymore.”

In July 2004, Scott resigned from his job and put his mansion and other assets up for sale. In December, he moved into a small apartment with four other men in Phnom Penh. “We started with 45 kids and seven staff. I would work three days a week and spend the other four days looking around Asia on my motorbike.”

Six years later, what began as a school for several dozen children from the dump has evolved into what *The Huffington Post* recently dubbed “an entire ecosystem” of services for the children and their families. The Cambodian Children’s Fund now serves 585 children—including toddlers in day care, elementary students in residential and satellite schools, and teens in vocational training programs. More than two-thirds of the children come from Steung Meanchey. Because their parents lose income when a child goes to school, CCF offers the family free health care, clean drinking water, heavily subsidized rice, and microlending opportunities. These services, says Scott, provide “a social safety net” for the families, and, he hopes, break the cycle of

Clockwise: Scott talks to children at the dump; fund-raiser Annalise Oberts gives piggyback rides at CCF; a visit with village kids.



Editor at large *Shannon Sexton's* articles, stories, and poems have been published in three magazines and five books in the U.S. and India, including *Stories From Where We Live: The Great Lakes* (Milkweed Editions, 2003).



Left: Children work 12-hour shifts at the dump. Right: Nhgan at school and holding his baby brother during a visit home.



he says, are his “pride and joy.”

Scott makes almost daily rounds through Steung Meanchey, handing out rice vouchers, talking to parents, asking about illnesses, and joking

with the children, many of whom follow him through the dump, saying, “*Sohm tao rian*” (“Please take me to study”). He stands out in the crowd that gathers around him—tall, pale, and freckled, he’s a gentle giant. Both children and adults respond to his compassion and his focus on improving their lives.

poverty and dependency so common in the developing world.

His ultimate goal? To transform the kids into community leaders—the future teachers, politicians, artists, and organic farmers who will rebuild and revitalize Cambodia. “These are children of Pol Pot survivors,” he explains.

“This is a nation of PTSD. We want to make a new generation.”

Today, Scott runs CCF with three Westerners and 148 Cambodians (most of whom are teachers). He knows the life stories of all 585 children—where they come from, who their parents are, how they’re doing in school. These children,

Off the Mat, Into the Dump

Last year, Seane Corn’s nonprofit project, Off the Mat, Into the World (OTM), raised a whopping \$524,000 for the Cambodian Children’s Fund. After expenses, 90 percent of the proceeds went to CCF. More than one hundred people participated in OTM’s Cambodia Seva Challenge, signing a letter of intent to raise \$20,000 in 12 months. Twenty yoga students made it to the finish line. Their reward? A two-week

volunteer vacation to Phnom Penh (also known as the Bare Witness Humanitarian Tour), where they took a crash course in Cambodian history, enjoyed daily yoga classes, visited Steung Meanchey, and participated in hands-on service projects with the children at CCF.

How Did They Do It?

Seane says the fund-raisers who were successful were creative, independent thinkers. “Instead of trying to raise \$20,000 in one event, they would break it down.

They’d do ten events and raise \$2,000 per event. The people who rallied their communities were the ones who succeeded.”

Seane and OTM co-founder Suzanne Sterling gave participants a tool kit with step-by-step advice about fund-raising and event planning. To create a sense of community and encourage problem solving within the group, Suzanne facilitated twice-monthly conference calls with fund-raisers from around the United States and Canada. “Just knowing there were other people on the line who were succeeding—or having similar doubts—was really inspiring for them,” she says.

Like many yoga practitioners, 23-year-old Abby Weis wanted to do meaningful service work, but didn’t know where to begin. She heard about the Seva Challenge at a spiritual activism workshop with Seane in 2007 and was so inspired that she raised \$20,000 in six months—the first to meet the goal.

How did she do it? “Dedication and a really strong intention,” she says. “I remember exactly where I was when I made that mental pact with myself. I went up to Seane after one of her workshops and said, ‘I just want to let you know that I *will* be making the trip to Cambodia in 2009.’ Failing was not an option.

“It wasn’t as hard as I expected,” she continues. “My family owns a yoga studio. We held benefit yoga classes on every



From Dump to Movie Screen

To understand where the children of CCF are coming from—and where they're going—consider the story of Hov Nhgan, one of the students featured in the new film *Small Voices: The Stories of Cambodia's Children* (Displaced Yankee Productions). On screen, he's a skinny 13-year-old wearing a dusty, oversized baseball cap, tugging at the collar of his T-shirt as he stands in the dump and talks about his life. He begins raking through the trash with a metal stick at 6 a.m.—searching for plastic, reusable bags, aluminum—and continues late into the night. It took him several years to learn what kind of plastics are valuable, he says. He earns 15¢ to 25¢ and eats one meal a day.

"Because my parents are poor, it's hard. They don't have money or food, so I make money for them to buy rice."

"When I pick up garbage what I am afraid of most are the trucks be-

cause they are very large and when we pick up garbage it could hit us if we don't pay attention...It could scoop me up with the trash."

He doesn't want to follow in his father's footsteps and work in the dump for the rest of his life. He wants to go to school at CCF, like his sister. "I can read a little, but I can't write," he says, perking up. "I want to be a teacher." The film crew, touched by his sincerity and articulateness, asked Scott if they could bring Nhgan to CCF, and he agreed.

Filmmaker Heather E. Connell says that like many of the children who come from Steung Meanchey, Nhgan has a strong work ethic. He was used to working 12-hour days as a garbage picker, and is delighted to study for that long instead. "Two years ago, he barely knew his ABCs," she says. "I just got his report card, and he's second in his class."

At school, Nhgan and his class-

mates study reading and writing in both English and Khmer, along with math, computers, health, and home economics. At night, they learn traditional Cambodian dance, drama, and music. CCF children complete two grades per year so that they can catch up with their peers.

"It's an intense course," says Scott, "but to date we have a 100 percent pass rate across all grades and all facilities. Every night at about nine o'clock, the kids drag out the white boards and the chairs, and the older kids teach the younger kids. No one tells them to. It just happens organically." CCF integrates all of the children into public school and enrolls the most promising students in a leadership program.

The Plot Thickens

Today, Scott's organization faces a new challenge: By the time this article is published, the dump will be full and

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holiday, and our community got really involved. I also created a yoga T-shirt that we sold at conferences. All proceeds went to the Seva Challenge. I'm an aesthetician and, in December, I gave my customers a 10 percent discount on my services and told them that 100 percent of their tips would go to CCF. I tried to find ways to redirect money that people were already pulling out of their pocket. They were going to buy a yoga class, a facial, a T-shirt—so why not have it benefit CCF?"

Every fund-raiser took a different approach. Brooklyn-based yoga teacher Adi Carter went on a three-month "trash tour" to educate Americans about how our consumption habits create situations like Steung Meanchey in developing countries around the world, while Blair Vaughn of Denver raised half of her money through a one-night silent auction.

What's Next

A number of Seva Challenge fund-raisers are continuing to help CCF from a distance, recruiting sponsors for the children and finding new markets for CCF Sewing Center

Listen to interview clips, read a Q&A, and **watch** video footage from Seane Corn, Suzanne Sterling, and several fund-raisers at yogaplus.org/offthemat.

tote bags, which are distributed in the United States. About 12 of the participants ended up sponsoring kids during the trip, paying \$100 a month for their food, clothing, and education while exchanging letters and becoming role models.

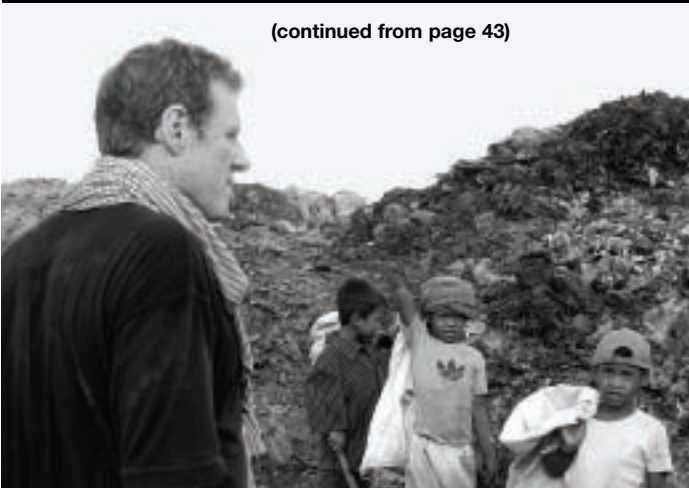
For information about OTM's 2009 Seva Challenge, visit offthematintotheworld.org.



Far left to right: Seane Corn in the dump; Suzanne Sterling (wearing hat) and fund-raiser Laurel Hicks with kids; CCF child connects with Seane.

To Cambodia, With Love

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the Cambodian government will have closed it, leaving more than 600 families and their children jobless and homeless. In addition, the global economic meltdown has made life as a garbage picker even more grim—as commodity prices plummet, scavenging becomes even less profitable. Inflation, famine, and child trafficking are on the rise, while charitable donations have dropped by 50 percent. Now more than ever, CCF needs funding to keep its programs running.

Scott is currently expanding vocational training opportunities for families in critical need so they won't have to disperse or relocate. He's converting one of the sewing programs into a commercial enterprise, marketing trendy totes and yoga mat bags, made from recycled sacks, in the United States so that the young adults (ages 18 and up) who make them can earn a living wage. The products are called Srey Mean Chey Tote Bags, which loosely translates as "Little Miss Garbage Dump."

He's also accelerating plans for an agricultural college—a one- to two-year program that will provide students with a stipend while training them in sustainable agriculture, money management, and community leadership. When they graduate, they will have saved enough money to purchase a small piece of land in their home province and can begin to involve their community in more productive farming methods.

Hope for the Future

As spiritual practitioners, we feel compassion, grief, and guilt when abject suffering like this comes to light. We travel to a developing country or watch a film like *Slumdog Millionaire*, and for a few weeks, our eyes are opened. We become acutely aware that the way we're living is not sustainable; that millions suffer so we can maintain

our affluent lifestyle; that in order to survive as a species we need to consider the collective whole. We say a prayer of thanks for our comfortable home, the nourishing food on our table, our loving family. But gradually, amnesia settles in and our eyes begin to close again.

Scott Neeson didn't forget.

"I feel like Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*. He loses his perspective, starts his own tribe in the woods. I have trouble relating when I get back to the U.S. I've seen so much it's hard to relate to Fred Segal and the hottest new restaurants, the best hip jeans to buy—it all seems very selfish. When people start talking about the film industry, my eyes glaze over. "On the other hand, people don't want to hear what I have to say. The child trafficking, the sexual abuse. The specific cases that have really affected me, shaken my views—they're something I have to swallow and digest on my own."

Scott is quick to admit that he needs to eat healthier food, sleep more, and start doing yoga again. He had pneumonia twice last year—no doubt from his daily visits to the dump. Still, he says, "When you love your job, you have a much higher tolerance for stress.

"The beauty is that no two days are the same. It's very dire work—you see the worst parts of humanity. But you also see the resilience of children who have come from some of the worst backgrounds you can imagine, and you

give them a sense of self-esteem, education, and safety, and they bloom into the most joyful children most people have ever seen."

Twenty-two of his vocational training grads have found good-paying jobs, including Saroeurn, a young man who began fending for himself at the dump when he was three years old. He used to collapse on a pile of garbage to sleep at the end of a long day. Now, four years later, he is a chef at an upscale restaurant and a mentor to younger CCF kids.

Some of the students who have been integrated into public school are at the top of their class, says Scott. Light years away from their life in the dump, wearing clean clothes, eating three meals a day, and studying in a stimulating, loving environment, the 585 children of CCF are learning and growing in a world beyond their wildest dreams...and thinking big about the future. ■

How to Help



To learn more about sponsoring a child or program at CCF; volunteering in Phnom Penh (they need certified medical personnel, grant writers and reporters, and education specialists); or for fund-raising and donation ideas, visit cambodianchildrensfund.org.

■ **Watch** a slideshow and video clips about Scott Neeson and the Steung Meanchey children at yogaplus.org/cambodia.