

He lived the quintessential Hollywood bachelor life – until, that is, he visited Asia on holiday and saw things that made him realise he could never go back to his former existence. This is his story...

GREAT SCOTT

BY ROBERT KIENER

I can smell the garbage dump before I see it. I've come to Phnom Penh to join Scott Neeson on one of his regular visits to Steung Meanchey, a 30m-high mountain of decomposing refuse covering 11 hectares outside Cambodia's capital. Wearing rubber boots, and trousers and shirts we will throw out later, Neeson and I climb up the garbage mountain. The smell is overpowering: a mix of sulphur, rotting flesh and excrement.

I choke back nausea as I breathe in thick, acrid smoke from the hundreds of small fires that are constantly burning. "Watch out," says Neeson as he points to a discarded hypodermic needle. "Step on that and you could get hepatitis or AIDS." In addition to the town's rubbish, hospitals dump used syringes, body parts and even aborted fetuses here.

Walking atop the garbage is like walking on a waterbed: one wrong step and you could fall into a



One man, what a difference: Scott Neeson revels in birthday festivities with two of his charges

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SCOTT NEESON

quicksand-like cesspool of toxic sludge. From the top of the sprawling dump, I see scores of garbage pickers through a smoky haze. There are some adults, but many are children.

Amazingly, many of them are barefoot. All have skin blackened by the sun and the filth. Every one has a sack slung over his or her back for recyclables. A caravan of overflowing garbage trucks thunders by, closely followed by a stream of scavengers, all eager to get first pickings as the trucks disgorge their loads. "Those drivers are ruthless," says Neeson. "Each year they run over and kill several garbage pickers."

Neeson greets numerous scavengers, asking, "Is everything OK?" If a child is injured or has been beaten, a regular occurrence at the dump, he will help arrange medical care. About 50m away I see three garbage pickers lying atop the trash under a plastic and cardboard shelter.

"Are they taking a break?" I ask Neeson.

"No. They live there."

Children rush up to Neeson and playfully shout, "I want to study. Take me to school!" Neeson is well known here; he visits several times a week and has placed more than 400 children from here into care at the charity he founded, the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF). But there are still children who need help. "It's heart-breaking," says Neeson as he kneels and balances a bright-eyed six-year-old on his knee. "I wish I could help every child here."

How Scott Neeson came to be rescuing children, abandoned to live like rats among garbage, reads like a movie script, an irony he can appreciate. In 2003, Neeson, 44, was a high-powered movie executive dubbed "Mr Hollywood" by the media. He had all the Hollywood trappings – a million-dollar-plus salary as senior vice-president of marketing at Sony Pictures, a Beverly Hills mansion, a 12m yacht, a Porsche 911, a pricey motorcycle and an SUV.

He worked and partied with the likes of Mel Gibson, Tom Cruise, Harrison Ford and other stars. Never married, he was often seen with a stunning girlfriend on his arm.

Dubbed "Mr Hollywood", he had a million-dollar-plus salary with trappings

His rise in the Hollywood film industry had been meteoric. A high-school dropout in Australia at 16, he got work during the day as an assistant in a small company that ran suburban and outdoor cinemas in Adelaide; and at night, as an assistant projectionist and cinema usher. Despite his lack of schooling, he was pushed to succeed and worked hard. His bosses noticed.

If scavengers take a wrong step they could fall into a cesspool of toxic sludge



He took a job as a film buyer in Sydney, and began climbing the corporate ladder, getting into film distribution and production. Eventually, Hollywood came calling.

But something was missing. He told a trusted friend, "There has to be more to life than making movies." Associates thought that Neeson might be suffering from burnout, not unknown in the high-stress, cutthroat world of Los Angeles filmmaking.

In 2003 he jumped on a plane and set off for a five-week backpacking and motorcycling trip through Asia.

"He'll be OK," everyone said. "He just needs to chill out."

Although Neeson didn't intend to spend more than a few days in Phnom Penh, the poverty he saw there, combined with the charm and grace of the long-suffering Cambodians he met, affected him. He cancelled much of his cross-Asia trip and began exploring the city. Everywhere he looked he saw poverty and need.

After meeting a boy begging on the street, he offered to support the child's



Neeson started by housing, feeding and educating 45 children

He told himself, “Is this all it takes to change the lives of two children?”

dirt-poor family. He paid their rent, bought them a refrigerator and paid to send their children to school. Two weeks later, he discovered that the child’s mother and father had sold whatever he had given them and spent the money on gambling and drinking.

A Cambodian friend took him aside and said, “You’re naïve, Scott. Those people are using you.” He advised Neeson to go to Phnom Penh’s notorious Steung Meanchey garbage dump, home to the country’s poorest. “There are children there who really need your help.”

The scene at the dump reduced

Neeson to tears. Hundreds of garbage pickers, including abandoned children, sifted through the toxic piles for recyclable glass, metal or paper, hoping to earn enough to eat.

Children as young as two years old, abandoned by mothers whose new husbands refused to support their children from previous marriages, were living in the mounds of trash.

He spotted a tiny child in ragged clothes, so covered in black soot he couldn’t tell if it was a boy or girl. He asked his translator to call the child over. Her name was Rithy, and she was 12. She told him she had never been to school. Another girl, Nich, nine,

walked over and listened. Both smelled horrible. He asked the girls if he could meet their mothers, to whom he gave US\$10 each. He arranged to meet them the following day.

The next day, as he sat in a riverside café in Phnom Penh’s tourist district, two children approached his table. It was Rithy and Nich, so cleaned up – transformed – that Neeson didn’t recognise them.

He promised their mothers US\$50 a month if they sent both girls to school instead of forcing them to work at the dump. They agreed.

Watching the two girls happily eating an ice-cream – for the first time in their lives – he asked himself, *Is this all it takes to change the lives of two children?*

As his plane, bound for Bangkok and a connecting flight to Los Angeles, flew over Phnom Penh, Neeson looked down at the city and thought, *This is simple. I have so much. They have so little.*

He subsequently decided to stop off in Phnom Penh for a few days each month while on his many international business trips.

Within seven months, Neeson had rented a building in Phnom Penh, hired a small staff and rescued 12 homeless children from the streets and the Steung Meanchey dump. He thought about making a permanent move to Phnom Penh but was undecided.

Then, during one of his visits to the Cambodian capital, his mobile

phone rang. It was a famous movie star and his agent, calling from Europe during a promotional tour that Neeson was handling.

“Scott, we’ve got a problem,” the agent said.

Neeson, who just that morning had learnt that five of the children in his new shelter had typhoid, answered, “What’s up?”

“It’s a real problem,” the agent told Scott. “The private plane the studio chartered doesn’t have the right sort of bottled water or food we require. We’re not getting on until this is fixed.”

Then the star grabbed the phone from his agent’s hands and said, “Scott, my life is NOT supposed to be this difficult. Fix it.”

It was a turning point. Shortly thereafter Neeson gave notice to his bosses and said goodbye to Hollywood, as well as the Porsche, the yacht, the motorcycle and the salary.

In 2004 he started CCF with over US\$100,000 (\$130,000 at the time) of his own money. To keep costs down, he slept on the couch in his small office in the building the new charity rented in Phnom Penh. He travelled around the city on a scooter.

At first, he planned to house, feed and educate 45 children and hire a staff of eight. By the end of the first year he had nearly 100 children. A year later he had 200.

Today, CCF provides housing, food, clothing, healthcare, education and vocational training to more than 400 children and employs 47 people.

Inside a tidy four-storey residence, scores of children are typing at computers, reciting English or taking a lunchtime nap in their well-kept dormitories.

A van pulls up outside. "Scott's here!" the children shriek, happily dashing down the stairs. A tall, blue-eyed man enters, kicks off his thongs and takes two squealing children in his arms. Two more playfully leap onto his back as the 1.8m-tall Neeson wades through a growing ocean of excited children, all of whom are pleading, "Pick me up, Scott!"

Beaming with joy, Neeson asks, "Have you ever seen so much happiness in one place?"

A good question from a man who has found profound joy in his own life. If Scott Neeson misses Hollywood, you'd never know it. Indeed, he admits, "I'd rather not talk about my time there. It's ancient history."

He does revisit his former home town several times a year to raise the US\$1.85 million (\$2 million) he needs to run CCF annually, but after a week in Los Angeles, he confesses he's always itching to get back to Phnom Penh and what he terms "reality". He is not fond of public speaking and usually lets the stories of "his kids" speak for themselves.

There's bright-eyed 17-year-old Kunthea, orphaned at three years, who had lived at the dump almost his entire life. Today, after learning English at CCF's main facility, he works as a chef at Phnom Penh's trendy Metro Café. He'd like to start his own restaurant.

There's nine-year old Eang, who was covered with sores and filth when Scott found her. Now, she's healthy, lives in a CCF facility and attends a nearby public school. She hopes to be an English teacher.

Nyta, 13, had never been to school when Scott found her alone at the dump. A local sponsor paid for her tuition at a prestigious English-language Phnom Penh school. Derided by other students as a "garbage picker", she usually came home to the CCF shelter in tears. But she never gave up. "She finished her first year as the top student," says a proud Neeson.

Some people have called Neeson "a miracle worker". The Harvard School of Public Health honoured him recently and described him as "a genuine profile in courage". Says Joseph Mussomeli, former US ambassador to Cambodia, "Scott saves and changes lives."

After five years of working in Cambodia, Neeson admits he has only just begun. "This is my life work now; I'm committed to these kids." Should anything happen to him, he has a succession plan that should guarantee the organisation's survival. His greatest hope is that some of the children will become Cambodia's next generation of movers and shakers.

Neeson's newest project is a satellite school set up for children who live in a shantytown alongside Steung Meanchey. "It's just an open-sided room with a corrugated tent and a fluorescent light," he explains. He opened it to teach English to children



"This is my life work now. I'm committed to these kids"



At ten years old (top), this girl was rescued by Neeson. She's now 14, healthy and happy (bottom)

on the waiting list for CCF. "They all want so badly to learn," says Neeson. He expected 25 children when he opened this new school. He now has more than 100.

Recently Neeson asked one of these children, six-year-old Leng, what she wanted for her birthday. "She was stunned," Neeson recalls. "No-one had ever asked her that."

A few days later she announced, "I want a birthday cake."

"I bought the biggest cake I could find and had her name written on top of it," he says. Hundreds of garbage pickers showed up for the celebration and sang "Happy Birthday" in mangled English to the wide-eyed girl.

"She was crying, I was crying, many of us were in tears," says Neeson.

Later that night, long after the cake had been eaten and everyone had gone back to their modest bamboo-and-tin huts, Neeson walked by Leng's hut and heard her singing softly to herself, "Happy Birthday to me. Happy Birthday to me. Happy Birthday dear Leng. Happy Birthday to me." ■

The Steung Meanchey dump was finally closed by the Phnom Penh government in July 2009. Many of the scavengers have relocated to the new dump, further out of the city, and CCF is busier than ever bringing them aid and sustenance. To make a donation or to sponsor a child, visit cambodianchildrensfund.org.