



FERTILE GROUND The Cambodian Children's Fund educates and feeds 2,000 impoverished youngsters

Rewriting Their Story

After 26 years in show business, Scott Neeson traded Hollywood for the poorest part of Phnom Penh. He tells Madeleine Ross about his mission to enrich Cambodian communities through education

SCOTT NEESON has a nose for a good story. During his reign as president of 20th Century Fox International, the Australian movie mogul released

blockbusters such as *Braveheart*, *Titanic*, the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy and *X-Men*. Tall and strapping, with the jawline of a Disney prince and a broad, intense smile, he looks every inch the Hollywood dealmaker who churned out such powerful tales. But Neeson's own story trumps all those he gave the green light.

In 2003, at the pinnacle of his career, Neeson was poached by Sony Pictures Entertainment. Instead of diving straight into his next challenge, he took a five-week sabbatical and decided to explore Asia—an exotic departure from the polished glitz of Los Angeles. “It was just a holiday, I was trying to recharge,” says Neeson. “I had no

charitable intentions or history of giving. In fact, I was fairly cynical about charities.”

A trip to Cambodia radically changed his life. Phnom Penh was never meant to be more than a stopover en route to Angkor Wat, and would have been just that if it weren't for a defining encounter Neeson had at the city's notorious Stung Meancheay rubbish dump. The 40-hectare landfill is the home and workplace of several thousand of the region's poorest people, most of them children and teenagers, who sort through piles of hazardous filth for salvageable material.

Neeson spotted a child alone amid the waste. “I couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl; she was skinny and swathed in rags. I called over my translator and within 20 minutes we'd found the girl's mother and I'd arranged to get them a house, money each week, schooling for the girl and medical

treatment for her younger sister, who was ill with typhoid and on her last legs," says Neeson. "That's when the hook was in. I'd saved a child's life and it felt great." That child is now studying finance and economics at the University of Cambodia and her younger sister is a healthy student in sixth grade.

This was the genesis of the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF), which Neeson founded in 2004. The charity provides education, nourishment and healthcare to more than 2,000 children in destitute communities and provides assistance to their families. Neeson has been on the ground since day one implementing the foundation's various programmes, which address every aspect of life. "Unless you're on the ground, you miss so much in the way of identifying issues and solutions," he says.

One issue he observed early on was that every night mothers would pull carts into Stung Meanchey to sort through recyclables.

"The world is full of people who are well educated.. and don't give anything back. Cambodia can't afford that"

Because there was no one to care for their infants while they worked, they put their children in the back of their carts. In the city's chaotic traffic, cars would often hit the carts and injure children; other children would become sick from being pulled around in the waste until 3am. Neeson's solution was to set up drop-in areas on the way to the landfill—nurseries with baby hammocks where children could be washed, fed and put to sleep while their mothers worked, and where they could be collected on the mother's way home. "You wouldn't even know this was an issue unless you were here," he says.

That's just a tiny part of the CCF's work; it has 68 programmes, many of which relate to education. Its schools provide lessons in English, computer science, maths, Khmer, science, biology and physics to help children reach university. The CCF encourages parents to send children to school by subsidising rice for those who do—and if the child has a perfect attendance record, the family's rice is free. It also runs a junior leadership programme that boosts self-esteem, raises

awareness of human and women's rights, and develops public speaking skills. Students are also given responsibility for taking care of an elder in what Neeson refers to as the "Granny programme," delivering rice, money, medicine and fresh water to the oldest members of the community. "This programme is critical in ensuring that education runs parallel with leadership. The world is full of people who are well educated, underemployed and don't give anything back to society. Cambodia can't afford that. Everyone who receives an education needs to be able to build society up in some way."

Medical care is another essential part of the CCF's mission. Illness is the reason most families end up working on rubbish dumps. "Over 70 per cent of these people are farmers who got into debt because of healthcare. No matter how hard they work they can't pay back their loans." The CCF medical clinic sees 36,000 people a year. In addition to treatment, the foundation provides free houses to needy families.

Neeson believes the best way to elevate the lives of the children is to help the whole community. "That tends to be the greatest failing of other organisations—that they take the child out of the family and the parents and siblings are left behind. This creates ongoing friction—the child feels alienated or guilty for leaving them behind. Our model is not only financially sensible, it's more ethical." Neeson celebrated his birthday recently. Instead of standardised showbizzy salutations, he received hundreds of handmade gifts and cakes from his beloved contingent of grannies. "It's an emotional roller coaster. The tragedies are matched up with the joys."

As for documenting his own life story, Neeson has been inundated with offers from ghostwriters. But that's not his style. "I'm very precious about storytelling. I don't want this story told simplistically. It's much more complicated." 🗨

To donate, visit cambodianchildrenstfund.org

ACTION MAN
Scott Neeson lives in Phnom Penh, where he oversees the day-to-day running of his charity

