

From hopeless to Hollywood: now hope for Cambodians

Employment assistance from the Australian government helped launch Scott Neeson on his way to becoming a successful Hollywood studio executive. Ten years later, the founder of the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF) believes his own model of assisting impoverished Cambodian families can bring hope.

Stuart Alan Becker

Scott Neeson was a troubled 16 year-old when he dropped out of high school in the sprawling suburbs of Adelaide, Australia. Amid record unemployment, he was brought into a government-funded program for the chronically unemployed and was supported in his first job - hanging up movie posters for country and suburban theaters.

After a year when the government stopped paying his salary, Neeson had already proved himself to the owners of the theaters in the days when movies like *Jaws* and *E.T.* were breaking box office records. He was soon offered a job with a major production and distribution company and, at the age of 24, moved to Sydney to start a career in film distribution.

In a rags-to-riches story of success, Hollywood beckoned and in 1993 Neeson moved to Los Angeles, joining

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ing movie giant 20th Century Fox and working on films such as *Mrs. Doubtfire*, with Robin Williams.

Ten years later and Neeson had become President of 20th Century Fox International, making mega movies such as *Titanic* profitable all around the world.

Neeson has worked with and formed friendships with Tom Cruise, John Travolta, Johnny Depp, Al Pacino, Mel Gibson, Harrison Ford and most of the Hollywood “A” List.”

“Harrison Ford is exactly as you see him on screen, but smarter and funnier, a really funny guy,” he said.

By 2003, Neeson had a home in Beverly Hills, drove a Porsche 911, kept a yacht, a Marina del Rey and attended the Hollywood functions almost every night.

Yet, despite success, Neeson never forgot his origins as a working class

“No-one wants to see themselves



Neeson share a moment with Theng Sreyleak's aunt Khorn Malin. PHOTO BY MENG KIMLONG

kid from Adelaide. Then in 2003, Neeson took a well-earned vacation - and visited Cambodia.

He had just signed a new contract to join Sony Pictures and negotiated a five-week break starting in Bangkok and working his way up to northeast India looking for a kind of spiritual release “an antidote to all the crap of working at the top end of the film business”, he laughed.

He had his bags packed and made that made a lasting impression.

“I ended up at the garbage dump in Phnom Penh and saw kids living on the garbage. It was shocking. Children working, living, surviving in an apocalyptic environment, with an utter sense of hopelessness and resolve. The horror of the situation was contrasted by how simple it was to help. I met with kids’ mothers and for a tiny amount of money, I had the kids going to school and the mothers living in a decent house with basic nutrition and education,

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Scott Neeson, the founder of the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF) talks to Theng Sreyleak. PHOTO BY MENG KIMLONG

and all for about \$40 per month.”

Neeson looked back from Cambodia at the “terrified atmosphere” of Hollywood, fast-food, garbage, girl-friends, first-class travel all over the world and a seven figure salary.

“Prior to that I had the classic rationalities of why I didn’t give to charities: I didn’t know where my problem and the problem was too immense for me to truly make a difference.”

“Standing on the garbage dump, just me and these tragic, helpless children, was a profound moment of clarity: either I was to do everything in my power to help these children or accept that their physical and material desires were of greater value to me than the lives of these children. It was honestly that black and white for me.”

“No-one wants to see themselves

as selfish and few would admit that we would put their personal material comfort before the life of a child. But we do it, indirectly, unwittingly or with rationalisation. I was dropped into an extreme situation and faced with two extremes of situations.”

Neeson returned to Hollywood, but increasingly knew he had a choice to make. Hollywood or Steung Meanchey. Within nine months, he knew his answer.

On March 13 this year, Neeson will turn 59 years old. He has lived in Phnom Penh for just over seven years and rents a house in Toul Tompon. He is the Executive Director of perhaps the fastest growing NGO in Cambodia. And in some ways, he works the same way that he always has. Two hundred emails every day and long distance travel on fundraising trips, albeit in coach class.

It wasn’t making films that Neeson was good at; it was the selling of the films around the world; creating the conditions for people to file the tickets.

“It’s very interesting with a film: you’ve got to decide what it is going to be; it starts in a tin can. *Titanic* could have been a disaster movie; it could have been an action movie; it could have been a romance. You write down the marketing statement: ‘an epic romance about one of the world’s most infamous journeys.’

“We do not rely on foreign aid money. Private donations and unrestricted loans allow us to be more nimble.” Neeson said. “We can react. When the Steung Meanchey garbage dump was relocating, we had

When you make that journey with a child or a parent, you don’t forget their names or their stories. The bond comes when you come to ask the right questions of the right child.”

Neeson’s goal is to be invisible in the lives of the families. “It’s a top down approach. I don’t want to usurp the family structure. CCF aims to support the parents, or rather for them to provide a safe, stable and nurturing environment for children to jump in to save the day and become the community benefactors. That is a danger. You can’t create a sense of welfare dependency. It’s counterproductive.”

Interestingly, two of Neeson’s biggest supporters are Rupert Murdoch and Sumner Redstone, two global media tycoons who famously dislike each other, but who agree on supporting Neeson’s charity.

Rupert Murdoch has been a consistent supporter. He has been unwavering. And Sumner (Redstone) is our biggest individual donor. Sumner feels strongly by giving up his Hollywood life; he never has doubt in motives. No one can accuse me of being here for the money,” Neeson laughed.

“We do not rely on foreign aid money. Private donations and unrestricted loans allow us to be more nimble.” Neeson said. “We can react. When the Steung Meanchey garbage dump was relocating, we had

an urgent need for a kindergarten nursery. From making the decision to build a nursery to accepting the first infants took less than a week and under \$1,000. You can do so much more if you’re not beholden to excessive reports and second-guessers.”

With funding from Credit Suisse in Hong Kong, CCF recently opened two new community-based schools. A third school will open in May, bringing a total of more than 500 new children into a quality education.

Cambodian Children’s fund (<http://www.cambodianchildrensfund.org>) gets most of its \$2.5 million a year budget from the United States, but also raises funds in Hong Kong, Australia and the United Kingdom.

Neeson flew to Hong Kong last week for fund raising activities.

In addition to pre-schools, English schools and a free clinic in Phnom Penh, Steung Meanchey district, there is a CCF administrative office and a shop in the vicinity of Russian Market.

Neeson identifies debt burdens as one of the debilitating factors facing poor Cambodians who end up at the garbage dump near Steung Meanchey.

The over-arching problem here is debt. Families arrive here in the garbage dump communities from all over Cambodia. Many were original-

ly subsistence farmers who moved to Phnom Penh in search of work, having sold up their small farms and homes in the countryside to service debts. In nearly all cases, they make their way here as the last ditch effort to service a crippling debt.”

Neeson recently chaired a community meeting of 130 families and asked the question: how many people have a debt that is holding their lives? Everyone put up their hand. How many of those debt were under \$500? Everyone put up their hand.

“The 130 families have a debt of \$25,000. That’s not an impossible amount,” Neeson said.

The answer was a simple agreement with each family: get your child to school each day and we will provide you the essential services to survive, and work with you to recover financial independence.

“I’m confident that we’ll see a community change, with higher educational levels, violence, less alcoholism and less abuse generally. The first test cases have been very encouraging,” he said.

“Traditional micro-finance institutions lend so that the poor can move up a run or two, hopefully employing people as they grow. That’s essential for a country’s development. I see CCF’s role as assisting those to get their first foot on the ladder and that starts with dealing with general debt and usury lending practices.”

Another of CCF’s supporters is self-help author and motivational speaker Tony Robbins. Every year Robbins runs a global youth leadership summit in San Diego, California, and CCF students represent Cambodia.

“Tony Robbins’ courses do remarkable things for kids and they come back and they look at the world a whole different way.”

Neeson says leadership is CCF’s greatest priority with kids going to camp at Kampong Cham, learning the values and principles of being community leaders.

“He is have an inner strength that has allowed them to survive. Channelling that energy into progressive, impassioned thinking is so powerful.”

Neeson had read about the 11-year-old girl Theng Sreyvannay whose parents had died of complications from HIV infections, in the January 26 edition of The Phnom Penh Post. The story caused Neeson to intervene and provide assistance to her family.

Their house and property were bulldozed by security guards from the Pham Imex company, backed by the municipal police.

This poor family of three were packed off to an open space in Srah Por village in Phsar Chhnang commune, Poanh Leot district, at Kandal province, where there was no infrastructure, clean water or sanitation.

Theng Sreyleak’s health started to suffer because she could no longer travel to town to get the drugs she needed to stay healthy, so as a follow-up story to the plight of the people evicted I wrote about Theng Sreyleak and how she was suffering from the lack of drugs needed to keep her alive and healthy. She was in poor shape and it was a heartbreaking story. She was living with her sister, aunt and grandmother under a plastic tarpaulin and it boiling hot through the day and at night the mosquitoes moved in. Without her anti-retroviral drugs she had a fever, had developed a

Neeson is proud of CCF’s garment centre, bakery program, health clinics and schools.

“You help the mothers overcome their obstacles, help them regain their patriarchal role and that’s when the magic happens. That requires providing job skills, teach counseling, education and very often rebuilding a sense of self-esteem.”

“She is a mother, she is a mom. There’s not a lot that gets me angry. If I find myself getting agitated, it’s usually because due to a cultural disconnect on my part. Sure, pushing for better lives for these children and families requires a strong emotional investment and I’m impatient by nature. However to be effective, I need to consciously let go of my Western perceptions of situations and people.”

“I do take issue with those who exploit the poor; those who are relentless in making money from the most vulnerable and impoverished. People have to be careful not getting a \$500 loan into a \$3,000 debt and pulling families apart in order to get their payments each month.”

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Talking about how his own background of support from a government program when he was an unemployed teenager, Neeson summed it up: “What resonates

“One family, recently arrived from Kratie, now has an impossible debt of \$4,000 and that’s growing by 16 per cent per month. The family needs every member of the family to work seven days a week, in the most grueling circumstances, and still the debt grows. Government intervention and mediation, either at a local or provincial level, could help if it’s applied justly.”

“Sleeping in a house awake at night is the fear of having a child slip through the cracks. In business, a misstep can mean a significant revenue loss here, it can change the course of a child’s life. I can’t read those kinds of stories and not take action. That’s what both drives CCF and runs me into the ground.” Neeson laughed.

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most these days is having been the under-educated kid, from a working class background, who could not see a future for himself. I know how important it is to have hope.

If you can see a light and believe in yourself, you can do anything.” ■

Post story leads to relief for impoverished young girl

Khouth Sophak Chakrya

TWELVE year old Theng Sreyleak has had a tough life for a young girl – she was born HIV-positive in 2000, lost both parents when she was only three, and on January 3 suffered another blow when she was forcibly evicted from the controversial Borei Keila site along with her aunt and grandmother. Caught up in one of Cambodia’s more controversial land disputes, Theng Sreyleak and her younger sister had settled in Borei Keila with her aunt and grandmother after her parents had died, and life wasn’t easy.

Her aunt and grandmother did their best to support the two girls by selling religious items in O’Russey market, and she was offered anti-retroviral medicine from the Peam Pech Hospital. Theng Sreyleak was also getting some education and was in grade-five while her aunt was in grade-nine.

Things weren’t perfect, but the two orphaned sisters were living reasonably well with their aunt and grandmother – until their forced eviction from the Borei Keila site, which has turned into one of Cambodia’s more controversial land disputes.

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Theng Sreyleak talks to Post reporter Khouth Sophak Chakrya.

rech on her body and was suffering diarrhoea. When her story appeared in The Phnom Penh Post, Scott Neeson from the Cambodian Children’s Fund came to her aid and took her in.

Now, thanks to the Cambodian Children’s Fund, her small family’s lives have improved dramatically.

“Now I feel absolutely delighted because I can have enough food, go to school and entertain with my peers,” she said as she showed off a new dress.

Khorn Malin, her aunt, told the Post she was extremely grateful to the Cambodian Children’s Fund, which has saved both her and her nieces from a life of ongoing hardship.

“I have countless words to describe my thankfulness to the Cambodian Children’s Fund for their generosity, especially Mr Scott Neeson. In giving a hand to my family which has suffered great difficulty,” she said.

Neeson, who has contributed so many resources and time to provide assistance to thousands of Cambodian children and helped them achieve their goals, told the Post he felt grief-stricken after seeing the article about Sreyleak.

“We spent nearly a week searching for her,” he said. “For once in Theng Sreyleak’s short life, things have finally taken a turn for the better. ■