

Scott Neeson is a modern-day hero who was so moved by the plight of others less fortunate that he gave away a huge salary and a Hollywood career to help.

WORDS **DEB WELCH**

Big heart



IT'S 2003 AND SCOTT NEESON IS LOOKING AT a scene from hell. In the stinking mounds of Phnom Penh's largest garbage dump, small things are moving. There are hundreds of children living in this place called Steung Meanchey. "It was wretched, the stench, the corruption, the child prostitution. The kids were incredibly vulnerable and powerless. Many of them were left there by their parents and it took me years to get an empathetic understanding of how people could do that." Scott had just finished up as president of 20th Century Fox, where he'd guided many of the blockbusters of the previous decade, films such as *Braveheart* and *Titanic*. He was on a six-month travel odyssey before starting in the top job at Sony Pictures.

"That very day I met two 10-year-olds, who looked about five because they were so malnourished, wrapped in dirty clothing and covering their faces because of the toxic fumes and the dust."

With the help of a taxi driver, Scott spoke to the children and then met their mothers. He sought assistance from an aid organisation and by the end of the day both families were housed and fed, and the kids registered in school. It cost just \$40. In fact, \$40 was enough for a whole month. "It was tragic", says Scott, "and intensely motivating."

It's easy to imagine Scott Neeson in 1966. A five-year-old just off the boat from the misty greys of Scotland, headed for the wide, dry plains of Elizabeth. Blinking in the harsh light, short back and sides kept in place with a slick of spit, his pale face turning to freckles. A small case with all his worldly goods.

It's the first transition in a life that traverses four continents and dramatic changes; from child of the Scottish tenements to SA school dropout, to Hollywood mogul, to campaigner for the rights of the poorest children in Cambodia. The short version sounds unbelievable, but the foundations are already there in that wiry, ginger-haired boy.

The Neeson family settled in the new suburb of Elizabeth. Scott's memory? "Hot, unbelievably dry; the incredible open space, the vastness of the quarter-acre block." Scott's father's job gave him social interaction and he loved his new garden, but his mother never settled; she missed the sociability of the tenements, where everyone knew everyone. "It's a lot nicer now, more homey; but back then it wasn't a community, it was tough. And school was tough."

Scott visited Adelaide earlier this year as part of a fundraising trip for the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF), the on-the-ground charity he formed in 2003. Since 2004, Scott has lived and worked in Phnom Penh, initially using his own means to support 40 children who had been living on the streets. These days, the fund supports more than 700 kids, with education as the cornerstone of their road to opportunity.

Considering his own childhood, Scott can't quite reconcile his own drive and adventurous spirit with the attitudes of his risk-averse father. "He didn't like change and he wasn't driven in terms of a career or life plan; I think he used up his quota of adventure coming to Australia. And while he was doing it out of care, he bestowed on us a sense of we couldn't do much.

"My brother and I didn't get much attention as children; there wasn't a lot of affection, we were invisible kids to an extent.

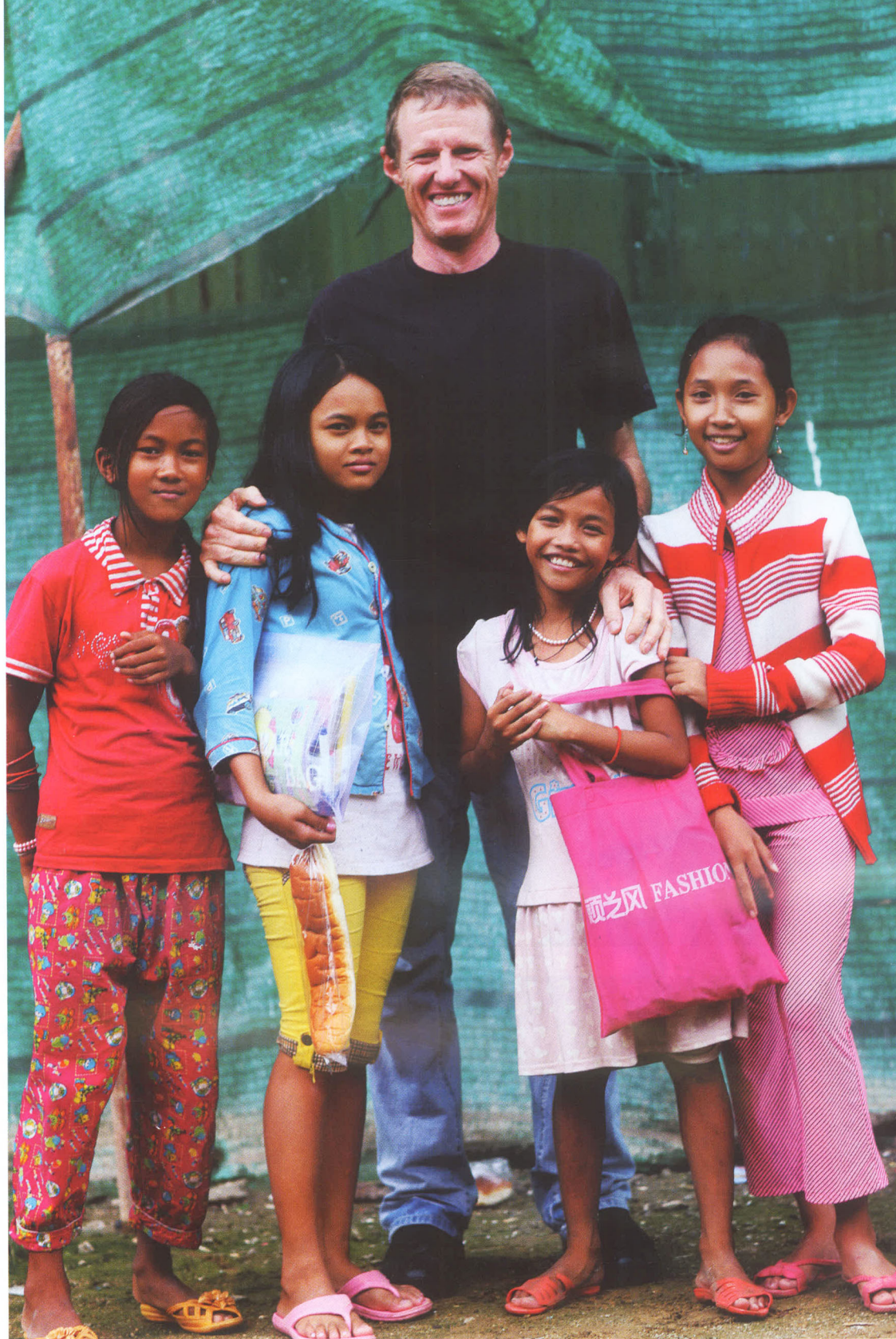
Right: Scott Neeson with some of the children supported by his charity, the Cambodian Children's Fund.

I didn't realise this till later in Cambodia; that I was giving the kids what *I* didn't get. I do believe that we're all trying to heal ourselves from our childhood; we try to make up for what we missed. In Cambodia, it was a big motivation to learn the language. I was acutely conscious of wanting to understand what the children were saying. I want to know the nuance, what the issue is. There's a tendency among Cambodian people who work for the organisation to cut out anything that could be problematic, to just give you the happy bits."

Scott says this is not out of pride, but instead points to the legacy of the Pol Pot era in Cambodia; a pervading sense of fear. "There's so much left over from what Pol Pot did. For example, people don't like to take responsibility; accountability, critical thinking, all those things were significantly damaged in those days. You can see it today."

In 1998, Scott Neeson is riding a wave in Hollywood. *Titanic* has just won 11 Academy Awards and as president of 20th Century Fox he has guided it through phenomenal cost overruns to extraordinary commercial success. In a high-stakes world, he is a winner. He has a Porsche and a multimillion-dollar home. "I loved the salary and the lifestyle; I loved my boat, Sundays going out to Catalina Island, diving, drinking beers with friends. I still miss that boat."

"But I was never a Hollywood-type person. Because of my upbringing, I never bought into the whole bullshit. I was responsible for making a profit, so the glamour was a very small part of it. I'd be working on budgets, finances, just like selling toothpaste. My skill was marketing; I could watch a film and understand why people would want to see it and, from



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there, the message in the marketing. That made me successful. But the business is cutthroat, and people freak out as if they were curing cancer. They're not! I used yoga to cope; not as a spiritual thing, just really good exercise and to decompress from corporate life."

A government work scheme in the late '70s got Scott his first job, with Clifford Theatres. It was the days of the big movie houses in Adelaide city and the sprawling drive-in culture in the suburbs and country towns. Scott describes his progress as "a



Left: Scott on a recent visit to Adelaide for soprano Greta Bradman's recital at St John's Church, which was dedicated to the Cambodian Children's Fund.

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step up the ladder every two years". At 24 he was in Sydney and 10 years later he was headhunted by Hollywood.

Scott's father was anxious. "He didn't want me to go to Sydney because I would fail and have to come back to Adelaide and wouldn't be able to get a job; he didn't want me to go to LA because I'd fail and have to come back to Sydney. Maybe it was contrariness, but that motivated me.

"When I became president at Fox, I had written into my contract that I'd be able to fly my father out first class, every year, and he'd stay at my home in Brentwood. Only then did he begin to realise that maybe things were going to be OK. And then I told him I was going to sell everything and go and live in a Third World country and he was back to, 'You'll never get another job!' And he was right about that!"

The ability to do something immediate and practical was "like a magnet". With \$5000 a month of his own money, Scott rented a building and set up the infrastructure to assist 40 children. But keen to be sure it wasn't the kind of mid-life crisis he'd seen all too often in LA, Scott took up his job at Sony Pictures and "gave

it 12 months". During that time he made 11 trips to Cambodia. The magnet won. In 2004 he moved to Cambodia and began working full-time for his charity, which quickly grew to supporting 200 kids. This gave Scott an unfamiliar challenge: asking for money.

"That was scary, because I'd never asked anyone for anything, I've always been very self-reliant. But you know people have so much. And I see how little the kids have and I know how the money's spent. When I was in the corporate world I was very cynical about this; whether charities were looking at sustainable solutions; whether it would actually help the people on the ground. And I was pretty much right about a lot of those things, which was sad. There is terrible wastage. But what makes CCF so successful on the ground is the commitment to educational outcomes, and the fact that as the head of the organisation, I actually live there. I don't know anyone else with a significant-size non-profit who does. I'm out every night in the community and that's very unusual."

The educational focus is a serious commitment; it's remarkable to know that one of the two children he met on his first day at Steung Meanchay starts university next year.

And she's not alone. By 2015, Scott expects to have around 200 in university.

"Of the kids from the garbage dump, more than 90 per cent are still with us and all are starting university in the next three years. That's our aim when they start their education program; there's a promise they'll get to university. We knew that would transform their opportunity."

A quiet surprise is another transformation, that of Scott's dad, who spent a lot of time in Cambodia until his death last year. "Oh, he was everyone's grandfather, for all the kids. It gave him love; he was so well loved and he was able to give love. Even though he was in his 80s by then, it was just a wonderful time for him, by far the happiest time of his life. It *liberated* him."

Scott's life in Cambodia is always an emotional journey; to understand how parents can dump their kids, the pervasive neglect, and the shocking level of abuse, both sexual and physical. He sees the problems and solutions as generational.

"The parents of our children were children during the Pol Pot era. Their families were broken up, their parents were tortured and killed. More than two million people were eradicated, the targets being the educated classes, anyone who passed year 10, spoke a second language, worked in an office, was a teacher. That generation grew up in the most horrendous times and have a collective post-traumatic stress.

"It's not until you understand it from a community perspective that you can really help; you need a certain empathy with the position of the parents, of the police and the children to start to understand why situations are the way they are and how things can change."

The South Australian Film Corporation is hosting an event to raise awareness and finance for the projects of the Cambodian Children's Fund on October 12. Details: ccf-australia.org