



## FOREWORD

## PEOPLE & OBSERVATIONS

# 6

## 10 Questions

Scott Neeson, aid worker, 54

**You abandoned a high-flying career in Hollywood to devote yourself to saving the children who live on the Steung Meanchey rubbish dump in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. What prompted this dramatic change?** The stench, filth, inhumanity and sensory meltdown of that place, the home and workplace to 1500-plus children. I was on a mini-sabbatical between leaving my post as president of 20th Century Fox International and starting at Sony Pictures in 2004 when I visited the dump. I realised how simple it was to rescue a child, to remove them from that wretched place forever.

**When did it dawn that you would abandon the life you'd built to start the Cambodian Children's Fund?** By the end of that trip, I gave myself 12 months back in Los Angeles before making any final decisions, but the drive to go back was an inexorable force. There wasn't a great sense of abandonment. In the year at Sony I sold my house, car, most furnishings, made 11 trips back to Phnom Penh, hired staff and rented our first building.

**How did you come to terms with that decision?** There were a thousand voices, real and in my head, working against me. Swimming upstream alone was tough. I came across a quote from American thinker Joseph Campbell that well described that time: "We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to accept the one that is waiting for us."

**From working-class roots in Adelaide, you made your way into the big time. What was the LA life like?** It was great. I loved my house, I loved taking my boat out with friends and I liked being in a relationship (mostly). There was glamour but I wasn't lost in that world.

**How has life changed for the children on the dump in the past nine years?** There are almost 1700 kids in our care, including 1365 in public school and our education program. We have 178 three- to six-year-olds in pre-school or daycare, and 72 in our nursery program. Our medical clinic treats 3000 cases a month.

**What about your own life?** Balancing time between work on the ground and the need to



fund our work is tough, but I am firmly based in Phnom Penh and out in the garbage dump community every evening. Truly understanding the issues requires me to be there, and there's no lack of inspiration.

**How is the program funded?** I no longer have the money to support CCF. We are dependent on private donations. Our fundraising costs are minuscule: the word of mouth from those who spend time here drives new donors. Our child sponsor program covers 25 per cent of our costs.

**What do you miss about your previous life?** I miss the infrastructure of a major corporation; having that one-call service when the computer crashes, being able to delegate to highly skilled executives; and I miss the salary! Personally, there are still a few rituals I miss. Sundays usually meant an early morning game of paddle tennis on the beach with mates.

**Can you sustain the pace at which you live now?** I think yes, but I'm planning for no. I'm confident that our existing donors would step up if anything happened to me and CCF is well positioned to survive me. Our overarching principle is to keep all we do community-based. That places the onus of long-term success on the locals. Already our older students are running programs, our schools and gender training.

**Are you driven by a faith of any kind?** I'm not a believer in the broad religious sense. I believe we have one life to live and it's the experience of being alive that truly matters.

JILL ROWBOTHAM

## SOCIETY

### Clicks appeal

**M**ove over Kate, Cindy and Naomi. There's a set of new supermodels in town – and you've probably never heard of them. Nor will you see Kirstie Bennett, Gemma Sanderson, Portia Okotcha and Jamie Gunns on the catwalk too often. But they can earn up to \$5000 a day and their looks are followed slavishly by thousands. The girls are models for online retailers such as Asos, Urban Outfitters and MyWardrobe.com. It's hardly glamorous – they'll model up to 30 outfits in an eight-hour session, and rarely leave studios on industrial estates – but the results speak for themselves: sales of a dress can rise by 800 per cent when sported by one of the models. The leader of the pack is Newcastle's Gemma Sanderson, who was the first winner of the TV series *Australia's Next Top Model*. She moved to Britain four years ago and was signed up by Sarah Doukas, who founded the Storm agency and discovered Kate Moss. Says Doukas: "The popular models generally have a healthy, sexy, girl-next-door look with a fabulous curvy or sporty figure." MyWardrobe.com's art director Ruth Cozens is rather blunter: "Finding the perfect online product is a constant mission for most retailers. They have to be flawless," she says.

LAURA WEIR



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