



TIPPING *the* SCALES

Hollywood heavyweight Scott Neeson gave up his Porsche, his yacht and a mansion next door to Cindy Crawford to bring hope to Cambodia's poorest people. As his charity opens its Perth office, he tells **Sian Briggs** why he regrets nothing.

THE GARBAGE DUMP where he stood was a filthy place with a stench so acrid he could almost touch it. Parts of this wasteland were so sizzling hot from methane that they melted the bottom of his boots. Children sifted through layers of crushed cans and broken glass; some scavenged for food among the syringes and sewage while others simply hid, their eyes peering from the smoky darkness.

Then there were the ones who lay limp in their mothers' arms, groaning or sweating profusely. Typhoid was snaking its way around the Steung Meanchey dump that several thousands of Cambodia's most neglected people called home, and Scott Neeson was overcome with dread.

Neeson was a marketing guru, a movie mogul, the former head honcho of 20th Century Fox and corporate mastermind at Sony Pictures. He could look at a film and know exactly who it would appeal to and why. And boy, could he do it well. During his 26-year career, Neeson oversaw the release of more than 100 films, including four of the top 50 highest-grossing movies of all time (Titanic, at number two, was the jewel in his crown).

But standing in the squalor of the 11ha dump that night, Neeson was out of ideas. As he struggled to contain his distress, his mobile phone rang. It was someone back at Sony Pictures in Los Angeles. There was an emergency. One of the biggest stars in the industry had a film to promote, millions of dollars were

riding on it, and he was refusing to board the private jet because the amenities were not up to scratch. Neeson was patched through to smooth things over.

He was used to "star" demands but, on this day, with the grim reaper lurking, it was particularly hard to swallow. Then the actor, who Neeson diplomatically declines to name, uttered a game-changing line: "My life was not meant to be this difficult."

"That was a slap about the head for me," Neeson says, still incredulous. "Here I was, completely traumatised by what was in front of me, and to hear that ... well, it was a message from beyond. It validated everything I was feeling." He returned to Hollywood and handed in his resignation.

Recounting the story during a whirlwind visit to Perth, it's hard to picture Neeson as a high-flying Hollywood executive. He comes across as peaceful and placid, with a gentle benevolence that belies an extraordinary power.

In town to gather support for Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF), the charity he founded as a result of his epiphany, Neeson made talking to schools a priority because he believes it is through children that lasting change will come. He wants to build connections between the kids he works with in Cambodia and those in more privileged societies, such as Australia.

"I'm starting a program called Virtual Classrooms where we get 10 of our children in an internet-connected classroom with



10 children from an affluent, privileged school. If you get these classrooms together while children are young, it's great because there is no judgment, just the desire to understand cultural differences and have this wonderful exchange."

Neeson was invited to speak at Christ Church Grammar School and St Mary's Anglican Girls' School through his involvement with local supporter Lee Partridge, an assistant professor of higher education development at the University of WA. After sponsoring a child with CCF and meeting Neeson, Dr Partridge went to Cambodia to see its education and child-protection programs in action. "When you spend time with Scott, you can't help but reassess your own priorities," she says. "He's an incredible human being."

Neeson's first visit to Cambodia in 2003 was supposed to be a three-week sabbatical for the quasi-Buddhist before he took up a post at Sony. He may have been living the American dream, with model girlfriends, famous friends, a boat in the harbour and a sleek sports car, but he was burnt out. "Those last three years at 20th Century Fox had been really high pressure ... It was really cut-throat."

Checking into the Raffles Hotel in Phnom Penh, Neeson was envisioning calm; a journey of sacred temples and spiritual experiences. But the poverty on the streets gnawed at him, a begging family finding their way into his wallet and his heart. "I thought 'OK, I earn good money, I can help'," he explains.

'It was a message from beyond ... it validated everything I was feeling.'

Trash & treasure
Scott finds friends in need among the fetid rubbish in the Steung Meanchey dump.



“I paid the **private** school fees for their children, only to find out eight other people had already done so. A local took me aside and told me what **was** going on. He said if I really wanted to help, I should go to **Steung Meanchey** because **that’s** where people really needed it.”

Neeson admits he had no idea **how** awful the tip would be. More than 30m deep and **spanning** eight football fields, it was **strewn** with waste. Thousands lived in ramshackle tents **above it**, or in villages around it. There was no electricity, no **toilets**, no running water and very little food.

“There were children everywhere. **Some** were from dysfunctional families, some were abandoned by parents **who couldn’t** afford them or didn’t want them. Even today, if a **mother** remarries, she’ll often leave her kids there. I used to think a **maternal** connection was innate, but Pol Pot proved you can knock it out of people. You can’t **judge**, because you can’t **imagine** what they must have gone through in the 70s and 80s. They are a fractured people.”

On that first visit, Neeson wanted to do something “then and there” to help. “I went to the two closest children; they were covered in rags because of the smoke and pollution and the heat, all you could **see** were their eyes. One girl’s father had hanged himself and the mother **was** an alcoholic. I **got the** translator and it didn’t take long to work out a process whereby leaving money with the driver, who I **trusted**, I could get them a room off a rubbish dump, **get** the kids in school and rice for both families and it was less than \$40 a month. **That’s where it started.** I was amazed by how easy it was to get them out of **that** wretched life.” He beams with fatherly pride

as he reveals one of those girls is about to start university.

When he returned home to LA, his heart stayed in Steung Meanchey. He had come to know it well. The average child was nine or 10; child trafficking was rife because the children weren’t registered and nobody was looking out for them. The mothers and babies had a **soaring** mortality rate. There were roving gangs and high incidences of domestic violence.

Nobody was looking out for them. It was a thought Neeson could not escape. “Living in Hollywood you don’t feel **connected** and it feels like someone else’s problem,” he explains. “**But standing right** on the garbage dump, I realised this was my **problem**. I could walk away, **sure**, **but** I couldn’t live with myself if I did. **Who else did these children have?**”

Soon after arriving back, he sold his five-bedroom home in upmarket Brentwood and moved into a “crummy rental”. He sold his yacht, then his Porsche, and spent the next year flying back and forth.

Cutting ties with material things proved relatively easy; Neeson grew up in industrial Elizabeth, South Australia, in a **working-class** family who lived week-to-week. He didn’t finish high school and was considered “chronically unemployable” until Clifford Theatres, which ran drive-in cinemas, took a punt on him. He delivered posters and assisted the marketing department. Before long he was poached by Greater Union, followed by Hoyts. He moved to Sydney before making the leap to 20th Century Fox in LA in 1993. Three years later, he was crowned vice-president. The top job followed. »





« Neeson hung out with Harrison Ford and Heather Graham. He played paddle tennis on the beach every Sunday. He had everything that was supposed to make him happy, yet happiness eluded him. “You keep thinking the next acquisition will be the one that brings contentment, but it’s a lie,” he says simply. It was after that first trip to Steung Meanchey that friends in LA described seeing a new light in his eyes. “I was supposed to be throwing myself into this new role at Sony, but all I could think about was getting back there.”

In 2004, Neeson decided to lease some premises in Cambodia, and hired his first staff member. CCF was born. Then he started the process of trying to get out of his contract with Sony. “That was a few difficult months,” he says. “They thought it was a story I concocted to get out of my three-year contract. Everyone was convinced I was going to Paramount and the lawyers were called in.”

Neeson had a clear vision for CCF, on maintaining a connection between the people giving the money and those receiving it. “I didn’t want there to be more than one or two degrees of separation, as opposed to the bulk mailings and other nonsense you get from the large charities. I didn’t want there to be a lack of closeness to the cause.”

He also wanted to personally maintain close involvement on the ground and to the programs. Nine years on, the now 54-year-old has kept true to his word. He’s barely had a day off since giving up the high life. At 5pm each evening, Neeson takes a walk around the dump. He knows most of the families and he likes to see what’s going on. After nearly a decade of going down there every night, “I know every child’s name,” he says proudly. “And I can pick a new child straight away.”

CCF’s early days were fraught with problems. Neeson personally funded the charity until his bank account ran dry after about two years — “about a third as long as I expected because we grew so quickly,” he says. Asking people to give money was a challenge at first but Neeson says it has become easier. “When you’re the guy on the ground, when you know where the money is going, when you see the way the kids are living, when you see the level of abuse that’s going on, when you see a one-year-old with serious malnutrition, you know you’re doing people a favour. They may not know it and may not appreciate it, but I see it as my role in life to separate them from their material wealth. I know it’s needed so badly. For the cost of a coffee, we can treat a person in a medical clinic.”

‘Living in Hollywood you don’t feel connected and it feels like someone else’s problem.’





Some high-flying Hollywood friends ran for the hills, while others stuck by his side. “Hugh and Deb Jackman have been great. They are such generous people,” he says. “And Roland Emmerich, who directed Independence Day and The Day After Tomorrow, among others, is an amazing guy. He’s very grounded, not Hollywood-like at all.”


Financials aside, there were other, more sinister, hurdles to jump. Neeson was taking on child traffickers and loan sharks. Not to mention the fact that when he left Los Angeles, the LA Times did a big story about him that was reprinted in the Phnom Penh papers with a headline that read: Rich man walking Phnom Penh streets. “To say I was a target is an understatement,” he says. There were countless kidnap attempts. The first CCF employee, a country manager, had sulfuric acid thrown in her face. Neeson ended up with two bodyguards. “Of course I wanted out, but I could never leave them, ever,” he insists.

CCF has five key programs — education, health care, child care, community outreach and vocational training — and 24 staff members, most of whom are Cambodian. Three schools have been built and more than 1500 children have been personally promised an education. “Our absentee rates are under one per cent,” Neeson says proudly.

He scoffs at the hero tag and admits there’s a lot about his old life that he pines for. “I miss the salary,” he sighs. “The security of private health care. I miss being in a relationship. I miss the infrastructure of corporate life, like having an IT division to solve the problem when your computer dies. I miss my friends. I miss the paddle tennis!”

But he’s not going anywhere. And as much as he worries for the children of Cambodia, whenever he ventures back to the US or Australia to champion the fundraising cause, he is equally bothered by the challenges facing children in the Western world. “They’ve lost such a sense of joy,” he says. “I find it a very superficial lifestyle. The kids just don’t seem happy and are way too plugged into technology.”

When Neeson visited the Perth schools to talk about his vision, Dr Partridge said there were queues of people wanting to get involved. “He is inspiring,” she says. “He’s just completely focused on the wellbeing of the kids. It’s the only thing that’s important to him.”

With a group of students now set to visit Steung Meanchey later this year to help the children with English, Neeson couldn’t be more thrilled. “I really believe the way forward is to get the children talking to each other,” he smiles. “That’s my plan to change the world.” 



Content Cambodia’s desperate dump children made former movie honcho Scott (above middle, with Harrison Ford) question what really made him happy.

For details on the Perth chapter, call 0417 776 887.

For more information, see cambodianchildrensfund.org.