

Post Magazine

Interview: Hollywood actress Heather Graham on matters close to her heart

Hollywood A-lister Heather Graham came to the rescue of a little-known Hong Kong children's charity at the 11th hour, by agreeing to be guest of honour at a fundraiser. Fionnuala McHugh finds out why.

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American actress Heather Graham with a child at the Cambodian Children's Fund rescue centre, in Phnom Penh. Photos: Antony Dickson; New Line Cinema

Earlier this year, when a Hong Kong charity called The Hub began planning its fourth annual ball, certain things fell into place quite quickly. They had a date: Friday, October 23. They had a venue: the Grand Hyatt ballroom, in Wan Chai. They had a theme: Hollywood Goes to the Races. They had a sponsorship package: peak sponsors (those who donated more than HK\$250,000) were offered benefits and opportunities that included "exclusive meet-and-greets with the Hollywood VIP guest of honour". What they didn't have was the Hollywood VIP guest of honour.

The Hub is fairly new on the Hong Kong scene. Two Hong Kong-based Australians, David Boehm and Bruce Stinson, who've been here for more than 30 years, decided it was time to give something back. They approached Bill Crews, whose Exodus Foundation in Australia works with the homeless and those in need; and now The Hub operates "as a children's support concept" under the aegis of the Bill Crews Foundation.

The idea is to provide a safe, comfortable environment in which underprivileged children can do their homework, have access to tutors and counsellors, be encouraged to develop new interests and have some fun. In 2012, the first Hub fundraising ball was held to raise money for premises. (That year, Hong Kong's Commission on Poverty estimated 209,000 children under the age of 18 lived below the poverty line here, a number that has certainly increased.) The following year, with the help of the Rotary Club of Kowloon North, The Hub opened in Sham Shui Po, officially Hong Kong's poorest district.

Boehm, The Hub's chairman, is an accountant by training "but these days, I'm in investment - natural resources and property".

Natural resources, in this case, means mining. One of his business partners is billionaire Robert Friedland, founder of Ivanhoe Mines and a man who's had an interesting career extracting the natural resources of countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar and Mongolia, not always to the delight of the locals. (According to Steve Jobs' biographer, Walter Isaacson, Friedland was also, briefly, a guru to Jobs when they were both students in Oregon, in the United States. Friedland was then in charge of an uncle's 90-hectare apple farm outside Portland, where Jobs would spend his weekends with Hare Krishna practitioners, pruning apple trees and moodily wondering where his life was heading.)

Five years ago, Friedland and an American producer called John Penotti established Ivanhoe Pictures to co-finance and co-produce local language films in Asia, particularly China, South Korea and India. Penotti has been on the Hollywood scene

for more than 20 years. You won't necessarily recognise his stable of films (In the Bedroom, Awake, Frozen - no, not the Disney one, the one about three skiers stuck on a ski lift) but he's a hub in his own right: his contacts are sufficiently stellar that after he told fellow producer Charles Wessler (Dumb and Dumber, There's Something About Mary) about The Hub, the latter arranged for American actress Carrie Fisher to appear at last year's ball. (Boehm likes to joke that appearing at The Hub ball obviously did wonders for Fisher's current career; she has reprised her most famous role, as Princess Leia, in Star Wars Episode VII, which is to be released next month.)