

So this man goes to see his doctor and has some tests run, and the doctor says, "I've got good news and bad news."

"Give me the good news first," the man says.

"You have terminal cancer and you have 24 hours to live," the doc replies.

"My, God, what is the bad news?" the horrified man asks.

Says the doctor: "I forgot to tell you yesterday."

That joke, Alison Arngrim says, was one of actor Michael Landon's favorites. It also got her in trouble the day Landon died of cancer, because when she heard he died, she started laughing hysterically.

"It got me, because I thought of his favorite joke," she told about 50 people gathered at the First United Methodist Church on Saturday. They were there to see Arngrim who portrayed nasty Nellie Olsen on the TV show "Little House on the Prairie" lead a session called "Healing Through Laughter."

Arngrim's seminar was part of the Inter-Faith HIV/AIDS Vigil of Prayer and Conference, a two-day series sponsored by Inter-Faith Ministries and the Care Coordination Team, which provides support for people with AIDS and HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Today's agenda includes workshops on grief and loss and safe sex, as well as free HIV testing by the Wichita/Sedgwick County Department of Community Health. The session ends with a 6 p.m. candlelight memorial at the church, then a comedy act featuring Arngrim at Cabaret Old Town.

Arngrim's message: Laughter is the best medicine for people with terminal illnesses. It relieves tension and shifts the balance of power back to the patient.

She began with a jab at Topeka minister and disbarred lawyer Fred Phelps, an outspoken critic of gays who pickets businesses and funerals with anti-gay signs.

"Monday, I'm going to do some tour stuff before I go home, and I thought I'd go see Fred Phelps," she said, drawing howls from the audience.

Arngrim, who became an AIDS activist after her "husband" on "Little House on the Prairie," Steve Tracy, died of AIDS in 1986, described her part on the series.

"I played Nellie Olsen, commonly known as the 'Prairie Bitch,' " she said, as the audience guffawed. "I tell people: 'It's not my fault. There's just no Midol on the prairie.' "

Arngrim, 31, said she has been a stand-up comic since she was 15. Since becoming an activist, she said, she has watched about 30 close friends die of AIDS and cancer.

She tries to laugh during their funerals.

"We make a lot of rules," she said. "If you are ill, you should act ill and you should be depressed. And if you're not depressed . . . there's something wrong with you. And if someone dies, you're supposed to grieve by other people's standards.

"And I have a problem with that. The freedom to laugh is very important." A short pause, then: "If anybody knows any good AIDS jokes, I want them." No volunteers? OK, then try this: A woman goes to a nutritionist and tells him that her son has AIDS, cancer, leprosy and possibly bubonic plague. She asks him for advice.

"We're starting him on a diet of pizza and pancakes," the nutritionist decides.

"Pizza and pancakes?" she asks. "Will that work?"

"I don't know," he says, "but it's the only thing we can slide under the door."

Tacky, yes, Arngrim said. But very effective.

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