

When Alison Arngrim appears in Lancaster this weekend, those expecting to see the devilish Nellie Oleson from the long running television show "Little House on the Prairie" are in for a surprise. The series and the simpler world it portrayed far behind her, Ms. Arngrim now divides her time between stand-up comedy and dedicated AIDS activism.

The actress and comedienne will present two workshops at the Unitarian Church of Lancaster, 538 W. Chestnut, on Saturday, Nov. 14. "They have asked me to do a basic safer sex presentation," explained Ms. Arngrim in a telephone interview from her office at Tuesday's Child, a Los Angeles-based support group which helps families with children with AIDS or the HIV virus. "I will also be doing a workshop that has become popular recently, called 'Healing through Comedy.'" Noting the benefits of humor to temper grief and promote healing, she said, "a lot of people are afraid to laugh about things like illness and death. Yet, laughter is an important part of coming to terms with grief." She gave as an example the grace and humor that so distinguished long-time colleague Michael Landon's valiant fight against pancreatic cancer.

Her role as an activist began when her close friend and husband on the Little House series, Steve Tracy, was diagnosed with AIDS. "I have to admit that it has been my experience that the majority of people I know only have really become involved when someone they care about dies," she said. "I am completely guilty of that myself."

Ms. Arngrim made up for lost time by carefully educating herself about the disease. She said her TV background was helpful in the learning process. "You do a lot of charity events," she said. "You could always tell the celebrities who had read the press kits and those who hadn't. I see a lot of people in the entertainment industry who may mean well, but don't do their homework."

During Tracy's illness and after his death in 1986 Ms. Arngrim threw herself into various volunteer activities. She became involved with the AIDS Project Los Angeles and the AIDS hotline. Eventually, she was appointed program manager at Tuesday's Child, which provides the basic daily necessities of food, transportation, even diapers, to children and families affected by HIV/AIDS and prenatal drug exposure. She also hosts the monthly APLA television show, "AIDS Vision."

At times her AIDS activism has taken its toll both professionally and emotionally. "I have had situations where the fact that I am involved with AIDS has been, pardon the expression, the 'kiss of death,'" she said with her characteristic sharp wit. Once an interview with a potential agent ended abruptly when she disclosed her work with AIDS. Still others in Hollywood support and applaud her efforts. She has appeared in several benefit shows and is a frequent guest on the talk show circuit. She attended the Fifth International AIDS Conference in Montreal, and has spoken before the Presidential Commission on AIDS. She was the first woman to receive the "Friend in Deed" award for her work with APLA.

She said that she relies heavily on her sense of humor to deal with the despair and grief. Ms. Arngrim recalled one interview with Geraldo where he asked her if her AIDS activism blacklisted her in Hollywood. "Oh, no," she fired back. "You are blacklisted much more by being a child star."

With her AIDS work taking so much of her time, one might wonder how she manages to have a career and nurture a relationship. Ms. Arngrim herself sometimes is at a loss to explain how she maintains a balance. Married to actor/writer Donald Mark Spencer, whom she describes as a workaholic much like herself, she said they just seem to work things out.

Ms. Arngrim is matter-of-fact about how she keeps up her grueling pace. "I don't eat meat, and I take my vitamins. I don't take drugs," she says with a laugh, "but I do drink a lot of Coca-Cola. I go and go, and then I'll crash for a day." Then she gets up and starts again.

When confronted with the often asked question, "Why does she still do this?" Ms. Arngrim responded with a question of her own. "I'm still trying to figure out why everybody else isn't doing this with me."

The workshop "Negotiating Safer Sex" will be held Saturday at 1 p.m. for a \$3 donation. The "Healing Through Comedy" workshop will be held at 8 p.m. for a \$5 donation. On Sunday, November 15, Ms. Arngrim will participate in the evening worship of Vision of Hope Metropolitan Community Church, Friends Meeting House, 110 Tulane Terrace. A free will offering will be taken. Proceeds after expenses for all presentations will be donated to the Lancaster AIDS project. Ms. Arngrim's visit is being sponsored by the Pink Triangle Coalition, Vision of Hope Metropolitan Church and the Unitarian Church of Lancaster. For more information or to make reservations for the workshops, call 392-2729.

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