

More and more people are dying of AIDS, `` . . . and the SHOW goes on" in Sarasota to help fight the disease.

Sarasota AIDS Support will sponsor the annual benefit featuring local and international talent at 8 p.m. Monday at Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, 777 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota.

The show's theme, ``A celebration of life," was taken from the 1989 show, according to Helen Bennett, the benefit's executive chairperson.

``There are so many new things happening that help extend and enhance the lives of persons who are HIV-positive, we want to celebrate the fact," she said. ``Being HIV-positive doesn't mean life is over."

SAS executive director Leland Sonis said funds raised by the benefit performance are kept in the community ``for programs for people who are HIV-positive and for AIDS prevention education."

Featured performers at this year's show include Tony Award winner Donna McKechnie, singer Lynn Anderson, composer Jimmy Webb and the Sarasota Ballet of Florida under the direction of artistic director Eddy Toussaint.

Local talent includes the West Coast Gospel Choir, Columbia recording artist Emory Ehr, celloists Michael and Bobbi, The High Heel Sneakers, and Bill Pruyn and his orchestra.

Comedian Alison Arngrim will host the evening of entertainment.

Arngrim, 29, played the role of Nellie on the Little House on the Prairie TV show and became actively involved with the AIDS movement in 1986 when Steve Tracy - who played her husband, Percy, on Little House - announced publicly that he had AIDS.

Arngrim said his illness forced her to educate herself about the disease and get involved with AIDS-focused activities.

She works with Tuesday's Child, an organization that provides service for parents of children with AIDS. She participated in Project Hope in Tampa earlier this year, where she met the Ray family of Sarasota. Clifford and Louise Ray received national attention in 1987 when their three hemophiliac sons, Robert, Randy and Ricky, tested positive for the AIDS virus.

``They said, `Look we have this big deal coming up in Sarasota and you should be in it,' " Arngrim said recently by phone from Los Angeles. ``You don't argue with Louise. You just do what she tells you."

Arngrim said she's been doing theater work ``and other things," but AIDS education and prevention are her first priority. She said Earvin ``Magic" Johnson's recent announcement of testing HIV-positive has had an overwhelming impact on AIDS awareness.

``I know all hell's broken loose here. His announcement shook up a lot of people," she said. ``There are people wanting to do stuff they didn't want to do a few days ago. I've had third-graders asking me questions adults don't ask. It's like the interest went from 0 to 60 in five seconds on the education level.

``Converse and Pepsi are keeping their contracts with him, which sets a legal precedent for people who think they can't do business with an HIV person. If Pepsi and Converse can do it, it's OK then, isn't it?

``But on the down side, it's kind of hard for people who have been fighting it for years to no avail and all of a sudden people are paying attention," she said. ``More than 100,000 people have died and their lives didn't have value because they didn't play basketball?"

Most Americans of all ages have seen Magic Johnson on the basketball court or at least have heard of him. Arngrim said his coming forward has made the AIDS situation personal to more people.

``The truth is, I don't see people getting directly involved until they know someone who has AIDS. Like me, where was I? I didn't get involved until my friend got AIDS."

She said Los Angeles testing sites have had an influx of people wanting to be tested as a result of Johnson's announcement.

``Normally, on a good week you may have to wait a week or so at the most to be tested. You can't get in until January now," she said. ``A hot line had to be put in because of all the people calling in with questions."

Arngrim said she is looking forward to being a part of the Sarasota benefit show.

``It sounds really good and I admire the people for doing it. In L.A. we have trouble getting people to put their money where their mouth is."

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