

Gazing at the prairies of Iowa is not the reason former "Little House on the Prairie" star Alison Arngrim is in Sioux City today.

Best known to television viewers as the Nellie Oleson, spoiled daughter of an impatient Walnut Grove shopkeeper, Arngrim was praised for her portrayal of the girl who perpetually frustrated Laura Ingalls on the NBC drama.

Her new target is lawmakers.

As a founding national advisory board member of the National Association to PROTECT Children, a lobbying group devoted to fighting child abuse and neglect, Arngrim will speak at 7 p.m. tonight at the Sioux City Convention Center as part of the Mercy Child Advocacy Center's annual Protecting Families Conference.

"If you look at what happens to molestation victims, you are talking about drug problems, HIV problems and crime problems," Arngrim said. "If you work to end sexual abuse, you are also working to decrease crime, HIV, drug abuse, prostitution and many other things."

After quitting the television show, Arngrim pursued other interests, such as theater and stand-up comedy. It was her friend and Little House costar Steve Tracy's HIV diagnosis in 1985 that turned her attention to political activism. Arngrim soon went to work for AIDS Project Los Angeles.

"I was able to get into many groups to talk about AIDS because I was Nellie. People who are very uncomfortable talking about these issues are somehow willing to talk about these things with Nellie Oleson from TV."

Two years ago Arngrim was approached by PROTECT children and asked to help raise awareness of molestation laws the group interpreted as protecting molesters instead of protecting the victims.

"We've changed laws now in about four states and we've found you do have a similar problem in Iowa. A problem that is in a lot of states is what we call the incest exception where molestation within a family is seen as a completely different event than molestation outside the family. It's ludicrous."

As Arngrim will tell the audience, sexual abuse is something that can happen to any child, including herself. Arngrim was sexually abused as a child, she said, and will speak about the impact that has had on her life.

Arngrim said she hopes that by talking about her experiences, she will draw attention to the suffering of other children.

The event is free and open to the public.