

Actress Alison Arngrim, who played Nellie on the television series "Little House on the Prairie," made a guest appearance here Friday night and told her audience frankly that she didn't want to be there.

It wasn't personal.

Arngrim came to St. Louis to talk about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome - AIDS, an illness she says has killed several of her friends. Among those was Steve Tracy, the actor who played Nellie Olsen's husband on the "Little House" series.

"I shouldn't be here," said Arngrim, 30. "Today is Oct. 2. I should be getting ready to go to a birthday party for Steve," who would have been 38 on Saturday. Tracy died in 1986, and since that time, Arngrim has been an AIDS activist.

"People ask me, 'Why are you still doing this?' " she said. "I say, 'Because Steve is still dead.' "

Arngrim spoke at a memorial service for people who have died of AIDS. The service was held at the Metropolitan Community Church of Greater St. Louis, 1120 Dolman Street.

Speakers read dozens of names of friends or relatives of church members who were living with AIDS or who had died of the disease.

Arngrim was scheduled to give workshops at the church Saturday on safe sex and healing through humor. She also will be the speaker at the 11 a.m. service Sunday.

About 75 people attended the candlelight memorial service Friday evening. Banners with names of people who had died of AIDS were displayed near the altar of the church. Speakers offered prayers for AIDS sufferers and their loved ones.

The church also planned a 24-hour AIDS prayer vigil beginning Saturday.

Arngrim said five of her seven godchildren had AIDS and that she "stopped counting at 20" the number of friends who had died of it.

"I'm 30 years old. I shouldn't be giving eulogies," she said.

Arngrim, an Episcopalian, is active with AIDS Project Los Angeles and has been given several awards for her efforts by AIDS organizations. She is host of a talk show in Los Angeles produced by the AIDS Project.

For the past three years, she has toured the country speaking in Metropolitan Community Churches, which are composed primarily of gay and lesbian members.

In an interview Friday afternoon, Arngrim said she first became aware of the danger of AIDS in 1984 when her offer to donate blood was rejected by a blood bank. She said she was rejected because she couldn't guarantee she had not been exposed to the illness in previous relationships.

"There was just no way I could know for sure," she said.

Arngrim has been tested and does not carry the virus, she said.

Arngrim became active in an AIDS speakers bureau in Los Angeles and mostly went to churches because no one else would.

"People were terrified" of being condemned by churchgoers who viewed AIDS as the wrath of God against

homosexuals and drug-users, she said.

AIDS "conjures up issues of sex, death and mortality," Arngrim said. "But I don't understand people wanting to persecute people with a terminal illness."

The majority of church members and clergy she has known believe AIDS is "a call to action to help people," she said.

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