

LOS ANGELES - Once upon a time there was nasty Nellie Oleson.

But once she left Little House on the Prairie in 1981, actress Alison Arngrim, moved on to a nasty ``slut bimbo from hell" image. ``I wore much less clothing then," Arngrim, 29, remembers, ``but amazingly I now wear a bra!"

That was then. Now, her life is devoted to promoting AIDS awareness. If there were a contest, Arngrim feels she'd be voted ``the least likely person to get involved in any of the things that I've gotten involved in ... (I'm) an unlikely suspect!"

Not just a celebrity spokeswoman, she has a paid staff job with Tuesday's Child, a non-profit organization dedicated to the care of children with AIDS and their families.

There's more. She's a hot line volunteer for AIDS Project Los Angeles. In her spare time, she's an unpaid counselor and hosts AIDS Vision on Los Angeles cable TV.

It was in 1985, she says, that her life took the dramatic turn from Hollywood party girl to concerned citizen who is joyfully overworked and underpaid in the war against AIDS.

First, a close aunt died of cancer. Then, good friend and Prairie husband, Steve Tracy, contracted the AIDS virus and eventually died. He had given out gift-wrapped condoms at his annual Christmas party.

She naively asked if he was going to die. ``We're all going to die," he told her, ``but I would say that when I die this is what will kill me."

Stumped by media queries, she decided to become AIDS-literate, which led her to her current role as AIDS activist.

Nearly 15 years after her TV role, Arngrim says this year brought a sad Prairie deja vu. At the July funeral for star Michael Landon, who died of pancreatic cancer, she recalls, ``everyone sat in pews where they would have been during a church scene on Little House on the Prairie."

``We couldn't help ourselves."