

Sonora woman conducts AF band

Written by [Union Democrat staff](#) August 19, 2011 12:11 pm



Sonora is about to welcome back one of its women in uniform in a big way.

Sonora High School graduate Capt. Haley Armstrong, 30, is the commander of the U.S. Air Force Band of the Golden West, which will perform Friday in the school's auditorium.

The concert band ensemble of the Band of the Golden West is scheduled to perform at 7:30 p.m. Friday. The performance is sponsored by The Union Democrat. Tickets are required due to limited seating.

Tickets are no longer available, having all been given out within days of the concert being announced.

Armstrong graduated from Sonora High in 1999 and, after various jobs with the armed services, she became the conductor and commander of the band about six months ago.

Her former Soulsbyville Elementary School music teacher wasn't surprised about Armstrong's musical achievements.

Jane Buzzard, who taught at the school for 27 years, was teaching Armstrong's brother to play the trombone when kindergarten-age Armstrong wandered into the classroom. Buzzard recalled Armstrong picking up the trumpet and making a sound.

"Well, she didn't start in kindergarten, but she played her first note," Buzzard said. "She is just a natural at the trumpet."

Armstrong continued to practice her love of music as a fifth-grader in the Soulsbyville Elementary School band.

That love continued even after she left the area. She went to college at Eastern Washington University to earn a music degree and, while there, joined the U.S. National Guard, where she served as an enlisted trumpet player.

"It was a way for her to continue doing her music," said Armstrong's mother, Shana MacDonald, a Tuolumne resident. Armstrong completed basic training while playing in the National Guard band.

After earning her bachelor's degree, Armstrong taught middle school and high school bands before returning to school to get her master's degree. While earning her master of arts in music education from Indiana University, Armstrong said she heard about a conducting job in Ohio through the National Guard. The job was only part-time but required Armstrong to attend officer school.

She earned her doctorate degree in conducting from the University of Kansas and, while still working for the band in Ohio, decided to sign on with the armed services band full-time.

“They really made it happen for her,” said Armstrong’s stepmother, Ginger Armstrong, of Long Barn, who is also reveling in the opportunity to see her perform locally. “She’s been wonderful for the military and it’s been wonderful for her.”

Prior to her decision to join up full-time, however, Armstrong received a teaching offer from various universities to which she applied, MacDonald said.

The Band of the Golden West, which Armstrong now leads, has 45 members, all fully trained airmen, she said. Band hopefuls first audition for a place in the band and then attend basic training. That training comes in handy as all band members are deployable members of the service.

When band members deploy, they usually take about 10 members to bases overseas in an effort to provide some relaxation and entertainment for the troops.

“Just a nice little memory of home,” Armstrong said.

The band also performs embassy outreach while deployed, playing for various leaders or governmental bodies, in an effort to break down barriers between countries.

As the commander and conductor of the band, Armstrong is the only officer in the group. She conducts the main concert band, and also performs the duties of a full military commander, including handling money and making hiring and firing decisions, she said.

“Musically, I get to conduct, which is amazing,” Armstrong said. “It’s just amazing.”

Her family seems to agree.

“She’s an outstanding leader and so she will be wonderful for this band,” Ginger Armstrong said.

In addition to public concerts, and playing for military and government ceremonies, the band performs many community outreach programs.

Armstrong said she views her return to Sonora as a way to introduce the concept of military life and citizens in uniform to her hometown, something she said she didn’t know much about while attending Sonora High.

Armstrong said she was looking forward to the opportunity to introduce her bandmates to the area.

“It’s very rare that we actually hit someone’s home town,” she said. “I’m very excited.”

The Band of the Golden West is stationed at Travis Air Force Base near Fairfield. It is the only active duty Air Force band west of the Rockies.