

# Alonso's New Band Director Brings Exciting Twist to the Sickles/Alonso Rivalry

Alonso and Sickles are fierce rivals on the football field. The relationship between the two marching bands is a bit more collegial, almost like a family feel. BY JOEY JOHNSTON

**T**hat's especially true this season. After all, the band directors are married.

Amanda Griffis, the new band director at Alonso High School, is the biggest supporter and closest confidante of her husband, Keith, the band director at Sickles High School.

Which makes the Sept. 20 football game—Alonso at Sickles — quite interesting.

But the universe already has spoken—in neutral terms. It's the Sickles' homecoming game, so halftime will be filled with the traditional ceremonies, leaving no space for a band program.

Amanda and Keith, though, already are plotting ways for the Alonso and Sickles bands to come together, perhaps with some pregame or postgame music.

"Make no mistake, though, we each want our teams to win," Amanda said with a laugh. "We might not approach it like an intense, angry rivalry, but we will be rooting for our schools. No matter what, it's going to be lots of fun."

Lots of fun.

If you're searching for the overarching band-director philosophy for this musically driven couple, look no further than that goal.

"What makes me really happy is when I look up at the stands and see my kids, dancing and smiling, having a good time with each other while in their band uniform and playing their instrument," she said. "They work hard. They get the lessons of discipline, of course. But band is supposed to be fun. We can play at a high level while having a very good time."

Amanda is from Thomasville, N.C., the furniture mecca near Greensboro, where she was a rocking percussionist for Ledford High School. She continued with the flute for four years at the UNC Greensboro marching band.

Keith is from Jacksonville. He was a fixture in his band's horn section and



became a drum major for the Florida State University Marching Chiefs.

They both majored in music education.

Amanda's first job was at Jacksonville's Sandalwood High. Through a mutual friend, she met Keith, already working at Sickles, when he was visiting his hometown. They attended an outdoor concert with the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra and it quickly became clear they had a lot more in common than just music.

Dating soon evolved into a serious relationship. Amanda moved to Tampa, where she became band director at Chamberlain High School. There was never a Chamberlain-Sickles football matchup—and it was nothing they wished for—but the Chiefs and Gryphons met in last season's preseason classic game.

The two bands played a number together—being introduced as "Ch-ickles."

That was supposed to be a lark, a one-off treat.

Now it's Alonso vs. Sickles—Griffis vs. Griffis?—every fall.

They already love it.

"We have gotten the typical, 'Oh how adorable' comments, but we have felt nothing but excitement over what this will be," Keith said. "We're excited to be teaching down the road from each other."

"In band, you are competitive against yourself. We're trying to be the best version of ourselves. We have pride in what we do at Sickles and I know Amanda will accomplish amazing things at Alonso. Her track record speaks for itself."

Amanda said the transition has been easy, thanks to the work of former Alonso band director Melanie DuBay, who is on maternity leave. Amanda came to Alonso in the spring to meet the musicians, observe protocol and learn about the school's traditions. She also went to Alonso's graduation and conducted the

band.

"Melanie DuBay has built an incredible band culture at Alonso," Amanda said. "She has been so helpful and kind. So I am inheriting a great situation."

This summer Amanda met with band leadership. She conducted a band camp, where marching fundamentals were learned and music was rehearsed. It was all very standard stuff for band directors, new and old.

The only difference: Amanda lives with the ultimate sounding board, her husband and fellow band director.

"I don't need to tell her anything because she's a lot smarter than I am," Keith said.

"Well, I can't argue with that," Amanda said in jest. "Seriously, Keith inspires me. He's an incredible teacher and musician. Whatever I am going through, he gets it."

What happens in the band room usually stays in the band room. Not with this couple. The lines are blurred between their professional lives and leisure time.

"We are each other's biggest advocate and biggest adviser," Keith said. "Whether it's teaching, watching musical performances or making music, it consumes a lot of our time. But it's really great to have someone to talk to who understands your passion and purpose in life."

"Some people don't like to come home and talk about their work," Amanda said. "We can't help it. We agree on teaching philosophy. And we are each very lucky that our spouse truly understands the profession. We basically see life in the same way. I guess that's why we are married."

On June 24, 2017, their wedding day in North Carolina, they quickly agreed on the song for their first dance.

It was "Make Our Garden Grow," an arrangement by Leonard Bernstein.

"I think both of us are excited about the days ahead," Amanda said. "We want to keep growing the band programs at Alonso and Sickles. We are both very enthusiastic about what can be accomplished."