

Kirk's followers gather where it all began

Turning Point USA took off after debate at ASU

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Andrew Sypher remembered the beginning being tough for Turning Point USA.

Sypher, now the organization's vice president of field operations, hearkened back to the days of budget airline flights and walking through the basement of the Chicago O'Hare airport to meet Turning Point's leader. It was 2017, and Charlie Kirk was in his early 20s at the time, having hired a few dozen people to join him on a mission to bring conservative viewpoints to young people across America.

"We were trying to make a movement happen," Sypher said. "No momentum in our favor. Everyone wrote us off. No one was donating."

That's when Sypher informed Kirk that the president of the College Democrats group at Arizona State University wanted to debate him. The group never looked back.

The reach of Kirk's movement was on full display on Sept. 15, with Sypher addressing a crowd of thousands. People of all ages flocked to ASU's campus to remember the conservative activist after he was shot and killed on Sept. 10. For many leaders of the conservative movement, it was a return to the place where it all began.

"Just a few hundred yards from where we're at right now, we hosted the first-ever Turning Point USA rallying event that Charlie participated in," Turning Point USA Chief Operating Officer Tyler Bowyer said.

Bowyer and Sypher were part of a long lineup at Desert Financial Arena on Sept. 15, honoring Kirk at a candlelight vigil hosted by conservative student groups on campus.

For Bowyer, joining Kirk's organization at the time meant accepting a sub-minimum wage position at a largely unknown conservative group. Today, Turning Point USA is represented across more than 2,000 school chapters and has expanded to include a powerful

political advocacy arm, Turning Point Action.

Debates became cornerstone of Turning Point's youth influence

From viral social media moments to well-attended speaking tours, Turning Point USA centered its focus on debates at the direction of Kirk when his organization was still finding its footing. Kirk felt it was a more effective way to communicate with the country's young people.

"We need to take the fight to them," Sypher said of the strategy Kirk embraced. "We need to argue that our ideas win."

Kirk later appeared on popular internet productions and was invited to debate by notable universities, including Oxford. His brand never shied away from hot-button takes that deeply offended many, from divisive comments suggesting Black people were unfairly given positions through affirmative action to staunch anti-abortion and gun rights beliefs.

Turning Point USA expanded quickly online, through platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Sypher said it was all part of the group's effort to meet young people where they are.

Bowyer, an ASU alum, described the early days for Turning Point USA on the Tempe campus as strenuous. While the group was officially founded in Illinois, Bowyer credited the college as the "birthplace" of many of the group's key initial debates.

"On campus, it was almost impossible to get people to stop," Bowyer said, describing students who would heckle them during tabling efforts. Behind him at the Sept. 15 vigil sat one of the first signs the organization placed on the ASU campus, reading: "Sun Devils think big government sucks."

Carson Carpenter, a 2025 ASU graduate and former president of ASU College Republicans, said he remembers Kirk as a champion of free speech on campus.

"The most sacred beacon of democracy is peaceful debate, and that's what he brought to college campuses," undefined.

Carpenter first met Kirk as a teenager in 2021 at a small gathering in the

Arizona Biltmore and later interned for Turning Point Action. He said he was skilled in persuasion and relating young people's everyday struggles to politics, noting how Kirk made himself "accessible" to the average student.

"A student could walk out of their dorm room hungover at 12 p.m. in the afternoon, and go up to a Charlie Kirk tent and ask him about a question," Carpenter said.

Kirk's rhetoric and visits to colleges across America also garnered fierce criticism — including at ASU.

Turning Point USA came under fire in 2023 after two members of the group harassed a queer ASU professor on the Tempe campus.

While the two Turning Point USA affiliates ultimately pleaded guilty to their charges and agreed to a diversion program, the organization defended their actions as self-defense after the two confronted professor David Boyles with a camera, questioning him for a show the organization produced.

Both ASU President Michael Crow and national leaders condemned the actions, with the president of the American Association of University Professors calling the altercation "a larger attack on the foundations of our democracy."

Kirk led youth movement fueling to Trump's reelection

Less than two weeks before the 2024 General Election, plain white T-shirts dotted a sea of people waiting in line to enter one of Trump's last rallies of the 2024 presidential campaign. Bold red letters reading "Frats for Trump" were plastered on the shirt sold widely by Turning Point.

Kirk had been on the Tempe campus earlier that month with former U.S. Senate candidate Kari Lake, tabling a voter registration event catered to the massive Greek life community on ASU's campus.

Kirk had returned to the campus for years, inviting anyone who wished to argue with him to meet in front of an audience.

Owen Anderson, an ASU philosophy professor and faculty adviser for ASU's Turning Point chapter, said he saw

many of the debates take place.

"I admire anybody who comes to campus and debates with students," Anderson said. "I think we need to learn how to have good and healthy debates."

Anderson said he believes ASU is committed to maintaining free speech on its campus, but hopes that in the wake of Kirk's death, the university will bolster its commitment to protect everyone's right to free expression.

"I think what we need to do is learn to focus on arguments and not focus on personal attacks," Anderson said.

"This isn't going to be a generation of rage"

On the morning of Sept. 12, Utah Governor Spencer Cox revealed the identity of the suspected shooter who killed Kirk as he debated attendees of the first stop in his fall "American Comeback Tour." Cox gave a word of advice for the country's younger generation who had watched the shooting unfold on social media.

"You are inheriting a country where politics feels like rage," Cox said.

But Carpenter, the former president of ASU College Republicans who now leads a media collective based in Gilbert, said he's feeling optimistic about a path forward after talking to people who were close to Kirk and those who had never met him but closely followed him online.

"This has inspired them to keep working, keep fighting for what they believe is right, to carry on a legacy that was already there," Carpenter said. "I believe that this isn't going to be a generation of rage."

There has been a surge in interest in Turning Point USA since Kirk's death, with the group seeing a substantial jump in new chapter applications and donations. The people guiding Turning Point USA have made it clear that the organization has no plans to stop growing.

"We are going to do this for Charlie," Bowyer said.

Reporter *Sasha Hupka* contributed to this article.
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Today, on the International Day of Peace, we as faith leaders come together to express our united belief in peaceful civic engagement. At a time when divisive rhetoric and actions are increasingly accepted as a form of expression, we condemn violence in all its forms.

Relying on our diverse faith traditions, we speak with a united voice to declare that differences of opinion in civil society must be addressed with mutual respect and dignified dialogue.

Our faiths require us to be peacemakers in our communities through our words and deeds. We call on elected officials, community leaders, and all Arizonans to embrace the ideals of listening and good faith negotiations.

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