

Kirk impacted generation of young Christian conservatives

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(RNS)—The lawn of Grand Canyon University near downtown Phoenix was filled with hundreds of students on Sept. 10 as the evangelical Christian school came out to grieve together the shocking passing of activist Charlie Kirk, who had been killed by a sniper's bullet earlier in the day in Orem, Utah.

One by one, they spoke into a mic, many praying for Kirk's wife and two children and sharing stories about his impact. Less than a year ago, many of these same students were sporting grins and red MAGA hats as Kirk, founder of the campus organization Turning Point USA, visited Grand Canyon on his "You're Being Brainwashed" tour.

"His impact was astronomical," said Gwyn Andrews, 22, who founded a Turning Point USA chapter at the University of West Georgia. "Every single person that is in my generation knows his name."



Charlie Kirk speaks at Texas A&M University as part of Turning Point USA's American Comeback Tour on April 22, 2025, in College Station.

(Meredith Seaver/College Station Eagle via AP, Associated Press File Photo)

Launched in 2012 when Kirk was just 18, Turning Point USA began as a way of educating students about fiscal responsibility and capitalism, but grew into a conservative powerhouse with more than 800 chapters on college and high school campuses.

His success came because as a speaker and debater he faced off against conservative Christian kids' "woke" counterparts, tirelessly representing conservative, and, increasingly, Trumpian viewpoints.

He was doing just that at Utah Valley University when he was shot and killed at age 31 by an assassin.

"Turning Point realized the importance of explaining and debating and championing conservative ideals to people under the age of 30," said Isaac Willour, a conservative journalist and commentator.

Kirk's approachability and self-confidence touched something in the teens and 20-somethings he set out to lead, as did Turning Point USA's cheeky merchandise and celebrity-studded events—answering the kind of glam that accompanied liberal visitors to campus.

Inspired loyalty, cultivated personal connections

Once he'd pulled them in, Kirk's unswerving commitment to conservative values made them loyal. Framing his political convictions as rooted in biblical truth, he emboldened many who say they had been made to feel ashamed for having conservative values. Then he supported them with a

robust, savvy, financially successful organization willing to go to bat for what they believed.

Students' first encounters with Kirk were often social media videos and podcasts. But on his college tours and at his annual, convention-sized AmericaFest conference in Phoenix, Kirk cultivated personal connections.

Several students told RNS they admired Kirk in part because he wasn't a politician. Barely in his 30s when he died, Kirk came off not as an idol, but as a "like-minded believer" who shook students' hands, liked their social media posts and took them seriously, said Andrews.

Leading by example, Kirk gave permission for conservative students to speak their minds and equipped them with the skills to discuss conservative ideas about abortion, gun rights, race, gender and sexuality with their liberal peers, students said.



Claire Gorlich (Courtesy Photo)

"So many students like myself at one point were so afraid to speak up, because they're afraid of either getting rejected by different friend groups

or their professors or people in their community,” said Claire Gorlich, 22, who started a Turning Point USA chapter at St. Mary’s Notre Dame, a Catholic college in Notre Dame, Ind.

“He really was the person that just made it, honestly, very cool to be conservative and made people feel confident.”

Many of his young followers aspired to debate like Kirk, said Matthew Boedy, a professor of religious rhetoric at the University of North Georgia and author of a forthcoming book on Kirk called *The Seven Mountains Mandate*.

Turning Point USA encouraged that impulse for debate, preparing students to defend conservative positions, an approach that distinguishes the group from other conservative college organizations.

Resonated with Gen Z young men

Kirk’s insistence on the legitimacy of conservative viewpoints resonated particularly with men in Generation Z.

JJ Glaneman, a 20-year-old junior at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh who started an unofficial chapter of Turning Point USA after the school’s student government blocked an official one, told RNS society has pushed the narrative that men are not entitled to an opinion on abortion. Kirk never hesitated to express his own staunch opposition.

“He taught this generation of men that it’s not only all right to be masculine; it’s great to be masculine,” said Glaneman.

After Turning Point USA launched its Faith Initiative in 2021, partnering with churches to host religious conferences, Kirk’s emphasis on his evangelical faith became a more central message and his rhetoric about “reclaiming the country for Christ” grew bolder.

“If the church does not rise up at this moment, if the church does not take its proper role, then the country and the republic will be gone as we know it,” he said at a May 2021 Turning Point USA Faith event at Dream City Church in Phoenix.

Recently shifted focus to Christian colleges

Turning Point USA, which had begun at secular schools, focused more on Christian colleges in recent years. Between 2020 and 2024, Turning Point USA chapters appeared at more than 45 Christian colleges or universities; however, as of last year, only 21 chapters were active.

Boedy said Kirk became the “go-to” person for conservative college students looking to translate faith into action.

“He talked about moral topics. He talked about God. He tweeted about that. I think that more and more Christian students were attracted to him because of that,” Boedy said.

“There were some Christian colleges that didn’t want Turning Point chapters for various reasons, but the more conservative ones certainly did. And I think that they were part of the choir that he was preaching to.”

Naming his values as not just political, but biblical, resonated with many young people seeking clarity, direction and meaning. As a husband with two young children, Kirk exemplified to many young conservative Christians what their futures could look like.

Tied to a deep sense of purpose

He gave young people the sense that conservative values about family,

stability, sexuality and gender were tied to a deep sense of purpose.

Gathered in arenas and standing shoulder to shoulder with other conservative youth from across the country, they heard fervent speeches about the promise of their generation.

“They put so much effort into the aesthetics and to making sure that everybody’s excited,” said Sarah Stock, 21, founder of the Turning Point USA chapter at Vanguard University in Orange County, Calif.

“They have flames coming up on stage. They have the president come to speak at their events, and everyone’s excited to see their favorite speakers.”

Stock added that Turning Point USA ensured that local chapters had the funds to host their own enticing events and pay for students to participate in national events. Tax filings from June 2023 showed Turning Point USA took in \$81.7 million, up from \$2.05 million in 2015.

After signing up to be president of her Turning Point USA chapter in 2023, Stock was flown out to West Palm Beach, Fla., to join a Chapter Leadership Summit for other chapter presidents. Turning Point USA covered the flight and accommodations.

“As a young person who just encountered politics online, the real-life events are what really makes you want to actually get involved,” said Stock.

Out of sync with social justice-oriented youth

Kirk’s more controversial takes, especially demeaning comments about Black and LGBTQ Americans—he was virulently against diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, called George Floyd a “scumbag” and said a Bible

verse about stoning gay people to death was “God’s perfect law”—are out of sync with the social justice sensibility of many young adults.

But some conservative Christian students told RNS Kirk’s comments about race and LGBTQ issues had been taken out of context. Others simply agreed with Kirk.

“It sounds like all of those are valid points,” said Stock about Kirk’s views on race. She said while Floyd did not deserve to die, she did question his character. She added that affirmative action makes it difficult to always know about an individual’s qualifications.

But they universally denied characterizations of Kirk as racist. “He felt like the left was treating people differently based on skin color, and he would stand there and say: ‘No, this person is Black, this person is white. It doesn’t matter. We should all be treated the same.’ And people would take that and interpret it as racism,” Gorlich said.

In the wake of Kirk’s killing, students, while grieving the loss of a person many felt personally connected to, are concerned about the appalling rise in political violence.

The near-assassination of Donald Trump in Butler, Penn., in July 2024 already proved right-wing politicians could be targets. Now, students say, any person with right-wing or conservative beliefs could be at risk.

“We realize that, if they think that Charlie deserves to die for his views,” Stock said, “they think that we deserve that as well.”