



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## University of Michigan students defend student leader against homophobic attacks by state official, 2010

**Time period notes:** *The conflict between Andrew Shirvell and Chris Armstrong began in April 2010 and ended in August 2012. From 29 September 2010 until 18 October 2010, the campaign focused on using non-violent strategies of defense. On 2 March 2011 Chris Armstrong appeared on CNN, using a non-violent strategy of defense. The rest of the conflict prior to 29 September 2010 and after 18 October 2010 (excluding 2 March 2011) focused on utilizing legal strategies of defense.*

29 September  
2010

to: 18 October  
2010

**Country:** United States

**Location City/State/Province:** Ann Arbor, Michigan

**Location Description:** Univeristy of Michigan

### Goals:

To terminate Michigan Assistant Attorney General Andrew Shirvell, to have Andrew Shirvell disbarred, and to have Andrew Shirvell apologize to those directly hurt by his actions and to retract his statements.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Online message posted to the public on Twitter to show support and an electronic message sent to the entire University of Michigan student body showing support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions › Online Mass Petition
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › University of Michigan students used Facebook pages and Facebook statuses to protest Shirvell's actions and gain support and awareness
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Informal University of Michigan student body community gathering and community lunch organized by students through The Spectrum Center to discuss the events, ways to show support, and ways to become an ally to the LGBTQ community

### Methods in 2nd segment:

### Methods in 3rd segment:

### Methods in 4th segment:

### **Methods in 5th segment:**

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › University of Michigan students organized a GlowLight Vigil through The Spectrum Center to show support as a community against bullying, hate, and bias

### **Methods in 6th segment:**

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions

#### **Notes on Methods:**

After the main campaign utilizing non-violent strategies of defense from 29 September 2010 until 18 October 2010 finished, on 2 March 2011, Chris Armstrong utilized a non-violent method of defense by appearing on CNN. The method used was 011: Records, radio, and television.

## **Classifications**

#### **Classification:**

Defense

#### **Cluster:**

Human Rights

#### **Group characterization:**

- University of Michigan Students

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

#### **Leaders:**

Chris Armstrong

University of Michigan Students

#### **Partners:**

The Spectrum Center

#### **External allies:**

University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman

Administration of University of Michigan

Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund

University of Michigan Board of Regents

Michigan Civil Rights Commission

Ann Arbor City Council

Michigan Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm

#### **Involvement of social elites:**

Not Known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

### Groups in 1st Segment:

- Administration of University of Michigan (Enter/Exit)
- Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund (Enter/Exit)
- Michigan Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm (Enter/Exit)
- The Spectrum Center
- University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman (Enter/Exit)

### Groups in 2nd Segment:

### Groups in 3rd Segment:

### Groups in 4th Segment:

### Groups in 5th Segment:

- Michigan Civil Rights Commission (Enter/Exit)
- The Spectrum Center (Exit)

### Groups in 6th Segment:

- Ann Arbor City Council
- University of Michigan Board of Regents

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 3 days*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

Andrew Shirvell

### Nonviolent responses of opponent:

On 29 September 2010, Shirvell appeared in an interview on CNN with Anderson Cooper. Shirvell told Anderson Cooper that his First Amendment rights protected his comments about Chris Armstrong, utilizing non-violent method 011: Records, radio, and television.

### Campaigner violence:

Not Known

### Repressive Violence:

Not Known

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

2 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

Although the campaign using non-violent strategies of defense was unsuccessful in achieving the disbarment of Andrew Shirvell and getting Shirvell to apologize and retract his statements, the campaign was successful in gaining the support for

the ultimate termination of Michigan Assistant Attorney General Andrew Shirvell. By moving beyond just utilizing legal strategies of defense and utilizing non-violent strategies of defense, structural and cultural changes occurred within the University of Michigan. Chris Armstrong was able through the events that transpired to create a \$100,000 scholarship fund at University of Michigan for freshman who experienced bullying and the University of Michigan Student Assembly assisted in helping openly transgender students to have roommates of the gender they identify with. The non-violent strategies of defense enacted by University of Michigan students spread awareness and increased support for LGBTQ issues in the university community.

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Chris Armstrong was elected University of Michigan Student Assembly President, as the first openly gay president in April of 2010. The Student Assembly is made up of elected representatives from every school at the University of Michigan, a public research university with roughly 43,000 students, who discuss campus issues and vote on legislation impacting the University. Prior to his election, Armstrong was the chair of the university's LGBTQ commission. In his presidential campaign, Armstrong focused on the issues of gender-neutral housing and weekend dining hall hours.

Andrew Shirvell, a University of Michigan alum and Michigan Assistant Attorney General, created a blog in April 2010, entitled "Chris Armstrong Watch," a forum used to criticize Armstrong's "radical homosexual agenda." In his inaugural blog posting, he referred to Armstrong as a radical homosexual activist, racist, elitist and liar and accompanied his statements with a photo of Armstrong with the word "Resign" written across his face and a rainbow flag with a swastika on it drawn next to him.

The interchanges between Andrew Shirvell and Chris Armstrong began in April 2010 and continued until August 2012 with two different strategies of defense being utilized: legal strategies and non-violent strategies. Armstrong played a lead role in the legal strategies, which began in September 2010 and concluded in August 2012. The campaign's usage of non-violent strategies began on 29 September 2010 and continued until 18 October 2010, with a separate usage of non-violent methods on 2 March 2011 when Armstrong appeared on CNN, speaking publically for the first time.

Armstrong took an indirect leadership role in the non-violent campaign. University of Michigan students became the direct leaders of the non-violent defense campaign protesting against Shirvell. The University of Michigan students received support from The Spectrum Center, an office at the university which provides education, outreach, and advocacy for the LGBTQ community, University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman, the Administration of the University of Michigan, the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund, University of Michigan Board of Regents, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, and the Ann Arbor City Council.

In May 2010, Shirvell followed a group of University of Michigan students who were celebrating a birthday party. Armstrong's name was a part of the party's open invitation on Facebook. On 22 June 2010, Shirvell telephoned Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's office, where Armstrong was working as an intern. Shirvell informed Armstrong's supervisor that Armstrong was a racist and a militant homosexual.

In September of 2010, Shirvell continued to write posts entitled "What's Past is Prologue: Armstrong's VIOLENT Supporters & the Coming Persecution this Fall," warning Christian, pro-life, and minority students. Later in September, he posted on his blog accusing Armstrong of not keeping promises made to minority students, participating in "flagrant sexual promiscuity" with a fellow male member of the student government, organizing a gay orgy in his dorm room in October 2009, and encouraging incoming students to become a part of the "homosexual lifestyle." In September of 2010, Shirvell visited Armstrong's off-campus home at 1:30 AM to photograph a party Armstrong and his roommates were throwing and posted the photos on his blog.

After six months of blog postings, Armstrong filed a personal protection order against Shirvell on 13 September 2010. Following this order, on 14 September 2010, Shirvell received a trespass warning by University of Michigan police, preventing him from entering all university property because of his actions against Armstrong.

In Shirvell's blog postings from April of 2010 through 23 September 2010, Shirvell wrote false statements about Armstrong's friends and their parents. He used his blog to state that some individuals were gay, when the individuals were not. On 29

September 2010, Shirvell told CNN's Anderson Cooper that his First Amendment rights protected his comments about Armstrong.

Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox also spoke with Anderson Cooper, deeming Shirvell's behavior inappropriate but stating that it would be illegal to fire him for First Amendment protected speech written outside of work. In response, non-violent strategies were utilized by: Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, who voiced her support for Armstrong and for Shirvell's firing on Twitter, CNN viewers, who reached out to Cox regarding firing Shirvell, and the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund, which formed an online petition, enabling the public to directly contact Cox.

On 30 September 2010, the university community responded to Shirvell's actions by supporting Armstrong through non-violent strategies of defense. Students utilized the Spectrum Center to email the entire student body, informing them of ways students could rally around Armstrong. The Spectrum Center hosted an informal community gathering to discuss the events and encouraged students to make their Facebook statuses "Elected By Us, Respected By Us." The center also sponsored a "Brown Bag" lunch where students could become educated about how to be an ally to the LGBTQ community.

University students looked to Facebook pages like "We Support Chris Armstrong," with 5,610 members, and "Fire Andrew Shirvell," with 5,976 members, to spread awareness and support. Students handed out "Elected By Us, Respected By Us" T-shirts. In addition, University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman expressed the administration's support for Armstrong. On 11 October 2010, students through The Spectrum Center organized a GlowLight Vigil to stand as a community against bullying, hate, and bias. On 12 October 2010, Michigan Civil Rights Commission, a government body that probes alleged acts of discrimination, condemned Shirvell's actions. On 14 October 2010, University of Michigan Board of Regents supported the campus community's response to Shirvell's actions against Armstrong. On 18 October 2010, the Ann Arbor City Council unanimously supported a resolution condemning Shirvell's actions.

Armstrong dismissed the personal protection order he brought against Shirvell after he was assured Shirvell would not contact him on 24 October 2010. By 29 October 2010, Armstrong and his attorney Deborah Gordon filed complaints against Shirvell, looking for an investigation and possible disbarment for Shirvell's attacks. The complaint focused on the Michigan Rules of Profession Conduct Rule 8.4, which defines misconduct. Armstrong's goal was for a retraction of Shirvell's lies and defamation.

3 November 2010, Shirvell's trespass warning was modified, allowing him to be on campus but preventing him from attending events where Armstrong was. On 8 November 2010, Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox issued a statement that Shirvell was fired for conduct unbecoming of a state employee. Cox noted Shirvell was not fired for his use of his First Amendment rights but for his harassing conduct, the effects of his usage of state resources, and his lies during a disciplinary conference. Gordon and Armstrong requested an examination of Shirvell's actions by the Michigan Attorney Grievance Commission and potential disciplinary action, including disbarment.

In response to the events between Shirvell and Armstrong, the University of Michigan Student Assembly looked to pass more legislation dealing with LGBTQ issues. On 23 February 2011 at a round table, the university stated plans to enable students who openly identify as transgender to have roommates of their identified gender.

Armstrong remained publicly silent through most of the Shirvell incident. He appeared on CNN in an interview with Anderson Cooper on 2 March 2011, after a recent series of suicides by teenagers who were bullied due to their sexuality, increasing awareness through non-violent methods.

On 6 April 2011, Armstrong and Gordon filed a lawsuit against Shirvell, alleging that Shirvell stalked him, invaded his privacy, and defamed him. Armstrong sought damages in excess of \$25,000. In May of 2011, Shirvell filed a motion to dismiss the claims made against him in Armstrong's lawsuit.

While in the process of legal cases, in November 2011, Armstrong posted a YouTube video announcing a scholarship of \$100,000 for University of Michigan incoming freshmen who experienced bullying.

In the interim period, on 27 March 2012, two years after Shirvell's initial firing, William Hutchens, a hearing officer at the Michigan Civil Service Commission released a decision confirming Shirvell's termination and preventing any further appeals. In April of 2012, Shirvell's motion to dismiss claims was denied and the trial was able to move forward. By August 2012, the almost two-year trial came to an end and Armstrong won his defamation suit against Shirvell with \$4.5 million awarded in damages.

The nonviolent campaign was successful in gaining the support for the termination of Michigan Assistant Attorney General Andrew Shirvell, but was unsuccessful in achieving Shirvell's disbarment nor did Shirvell retract his statements or apologize to those his actions affected. By moving beyond just utilizing legal strategies of defense, non-violent strategies of defense brought further achievement and led to structural and cultural changes within the university. The University of Michigan Student Assembly assisted in helping openly transgender students to have roommates of the gender they identify with and Armstrong created a scholarship fund for University of Michigan freshmen who experienced bullying. The nonviolent strategies of defense enacted by University of Michigan students in support of Chris Armstrong spread awareness and increased support for LGBTQ issues in the University of Michigan community.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

Throughout the process, Chris Armstrong was influenced by the Tyler Clementi case which occurred at Rutgers University in September of 2010. (1) The cyber-bullying of Clementi and Shirvell's cyber-bullying of Armstrong both are examples of attacks on the LGBT community and how frequently members of the community are bullied. (1)

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**Additional Notes:**

Although Chris Armstrong was a leader in the campaign, he remained publicly silent throughout the events, except for appearing on CNN on 2 March 2011. Armstrong was directly involved with legal strategies of defense and maintained an indirect leadership role in the non-violent campaign. University of Michigan students were the direct leaders of the non-violent defense campaign.

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**

Sabrina Merold 22/09/2013

**A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.**

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