

Turning backs on protesters, hundreds form wall to support Michael Sam

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Attendees of One Wall, One Mizzou in support of Michael Sam turned away from the street during their non-protest in response to Westboro Baptist Church on Saturday. Word about the event spread quickly on Facebook following Sam's announcement and has more than 5,000 people confirmed as "Going." | [Katie Bell](#)



Madison Ainsworth signs a card for the Westboro Baptist Church to thank them for bringing people together and helping Rachel Brekhus collect money for The Center Project on Saturday. The Center Project encourages respect and inclusion for people of all sexual orientations and identities.

| [Sarah Rothberg](#)



Cheyane Frizzell, a senior at MU and Paige Larve show up to support Michael Sam in homemade shirts on Saturday. "We support Sam and believe that everyone should be able to be who they want to be," Frizzell said. | [Sarah Rothberg](#)

Attendees of One Wall, One Mizzou rallied to show support for Michael Sam, forming a line in response to Westboro Baptist Church. The event was organized on Facebook, and has more than 5,000 users confirmed as "Going."
; The Missourian

**Correction: An earlier version of this story misspelled the names of Amy and Laura Whiffen and Kelsey Wingo.*

COLUMBIA — It started as a trickle — a few people milling about on the intersection of Tiger Avenue and Stadium Boulevard.

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Then it grew. A line of bodies started stretching east, then west.

They came in droves, huddling together against the February cold.

For the next two hours, a human wall swelled along the north side of Stadium Boulevard until more than a thousand people stood atop the icy sidewalk.

Most wore black and gold, with some sporting rainbow buttons labeled #StandWithSam on their chests. Chants of "M-I-Z"

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were loudly answered by not just "Z-O-U" but also "S-A-M."

Cars honked their approval, and iPhone cameras peered from open windows. Twice, the line locked arms and stumbled its way through MU's "Alma Mater."

The people were there as part of One Wall, One Mizzou, an event in support of Michael Sam, the former Missouri football player [who publicly announced last week that he is gay](#).

For most of the afternoon, they had their backs turned on what they were responding to: 14 members of the Westboro Baptist Church who waved signs, blared music and stomped on rainbow and American flags in protest of Sam across the street.

MU students Brian Reitz and Varun Bajaj thought that the line should face campus, away from the protesters on the south side of the street, to refrain from giving them a captive audience.

"I think it's great that we're all gathered out here, but by looking at them and giving them attention, we give their message a platform," Reitz said. "By turning our backs and not looking at their signs, it allows us to show them that we really don't care what they think."

Missouri Students Association President Mason Schara and Vice President Kelsey Haberberger passed the message along the line, which at its longest spanned almost the entire sidewalk between Providence Road and Tiger Avenue.

Students weren't the only ones in line. Amy and Laura Whiffen, a same-sex couple who were married in Iowa, drove from Springfield to be with their daughter Kelsey Wingo, an MU student, at the protest.

"She (Kelsey) has come a long way in accepting the gay lifestyle with me and Amy. We're here to support Michael Sam and do it with Kelsey," Laura Whiffen said. "We believe in this."

Suzanne and Rodney Brownell made the trip from the Lake of the Ozarks for the sole purpose of attending the event. The Brownells' son told them he was gay about nine years ago.

"We're showing him our support through supporting Michael," Suzanne Brownell said.

The Brownells said their views changed when their son, who now lives in Prague, came out to them.

"For us, it's been something that we've come to grips with and are able to accept," Rodney

Brownell said. "Not tolerate, but accept. To me, that's the big difference."

And for Delan Ellington, Sam's announcement had a special resonance. Ellington, who is a gay, black man, linked arms with friends as he had his back turned to the protesters.

"(You) rarely see black, gay role models," Ellington said. "And when they are, they are always super skinny and very lean. Michael Sam, I met him, and we have a similar body size. That's just a huge thing for me. It's empowering."

On the Sunday night Sam announced he is gay, the Westboro Baptist Church, a Topeka-based group that's achieved notoriety for protesting homosexuality at military funerals, announced that it would protest at MU.

In response, MU sophomores Kelaney Lakers and Alix Carruth organized "One Wall, One Mizzou. #StandWithSam" on Facebook. By the time the event started Saturday afternoon, almost 5,000 people had signed up to attend.

Although the actual attendance didn't match that number, Haberberger said, the turnout "blew our expectations out of the water."

"We passed out over a thousand (#StandWithSam) buttons in the first 30 minutes we were here, and I think we've at least doubled in size (after)," Haberberger said.

One of the people wearing a button was Max Copeland, a former teammate of Sam's. He said that it was an opportunity to physically show his support for someone he considers a brother.

But the mass of bodies didn't engage with the small band of protestors across the street. That was crucial, Copeland said.

"It's Martin Luther King that said — this is probably just butchering it — but, 'Nonviolence is not just refusing to shoot a man but also refusing to hate him,'" Copeland said. "We would be hypocrites to be anything less than peaceful around these people because this whole thing is about peace and love."

Supervising editor is [Edward Hart](#).