Portland vigorously defends her integrity and Penn State program

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By Jill Lieber, USA TODAY
Penn State basketball coach Rene Portland, accused in a federal lawsuit of discriminating against former player Jennifer Harris, said Wednesday she's disappointed the allegations have overshadowed the program and reiterated she did not dismiss Harris from the team in March 2005 because of her race or sexual orientation.

Harris, who says she is not gay, says Portland cut her because she perceived Harris to be a lesbian.

"The truth is, as I've said before, her sexual orientation, and her race, had no bearings on my decisions," Portland said in an exclusive telephone interview with her attorney Jack Stover, her husband John Portland and Penn State assistant athletic director for communications Erin Whiteside on the line. "I don't think it's relevant to me. It's that plain and simple. I do not judge her, or people, based on sexual orientation or their race."

One of the most successful coaches in college women's basketball history, the 53-year-old Portland said she always has complied with the university's non-discrimination policy, instituted in 1991 after she failed to deny in a *Philadelphia Inquirer* story that she discriminated against lesbians.

On Wednesday, Portland said she is committed to diversity, inclusion and equality — and that Harris' allegations have hurt her.

"I've been a strong advocate of equal rights for women, athletes, for decades," Portland said. "And I'm going to be real honest with you, I am shocked and saddened by the unfortunate allegations made by Jen Harris. I think the thing that really, really disappoints me is that these allegations have overshadowed the achievements and the success of this basketball program and the great players that have come through here. We are committed to a lot of good things here, one of them being the diversity and the non-discrimination. ... Over the 26 years, I think most kids have had a positive experience here at Penn State. ... So, I can't really explain why Jen Harris is a rare exception. And I believe that the allegations are unfounded."

Portland has been referred to as "mommy coach," because she promises recruits' parents she will be a mother away from home. Her own family, she said, is the No. 1 priority. She and her husband have four children — Christine, 28, John Jr., 27, Stephen, 23, and Delisa, 10, adopted in 2005 — and also have been foster parents. Last month, they welcomed their first grandchild, a girl, McKenzie, born to Christine and her husband, who live in Florida.

Portland said Harris' allegations and her federal lawsuit have been difficult, but that she has maintained her focus — coaching the Lady Lions — because of support from her family, the university and fans.

"I think I did underestimate the negative impact that this former player could have on my team and on the reputation of this program," Portland said.

"And I do think it has had an impact, but I have felt some incredible, incredible support from Penn State, obviously, incredible support from my family, and it still makes me so proud of this program and what I've accomplished here in the last 26 years. ... And I am grateful to the outpouring of support that I receive every day from Penn State alumni, far, near, in the community, in the grocery store, you know. There's a lot of hugging, a lot of praying going on for Rene Portland."