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Portland lawsuit draws mixed reactions from Penn State students

By Amalie Benjamin, Globe Staff | March 26, 2006

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. --Basketball plays on the big-screen TV in the campus student center. Chairs are filled as Penn State students take a midafternoon break to watch a surprisingly close first-round game between Tennessee and Winthrop. Chad Eline, a grad student sitting halfway back in the room, checks off teams in his men's bracket as the Volunteers survive on a last-second jumper, keeping them safe, for the time being, and sending them to the second round.

For the Penn State women's basketball team, all is not so clear. With a lawsuit alleging sexual and racial discrimination against coach Rene Portland, and a team coming off its first sub-.500 season in 33 years, few things are easy these days for the Lady Lions.

''I wasn't aware of [Portland's] attitude until this year, so I thought she was great,'' said Eline, a grad student in the secondary school counseling program. ''She was winning for the program and there wasn't controversy, so I thought she was one of those coaches who was great for the university. [Now] I don't think it reflects well on Penn State athletics.

''I would actually prefer if she did step down. I think the allegations are enough, the fact that she made derogatory remarks in the 1980s about having lesbians in the program, as well as what she's been going through now. I think there's enough evidence, probably, to prove that she is discriminatory.''

And, yet, for the majority student population of this rural state school, the winners of these first-round men's tournament games seem not only more engaging, but, to many, more important.

Most students shrug when Portland's name is brought up. They know the story, vaguely, from the headlines produced in the student paper, the Daily Collegian. They'll wait to see what happens when the legal battles play out, but, in truth, they don't really care.

''The general consensus is that if there's no real proof against her, she shouldn't be penalized for what [Jennifer Harris] is saying about her,'' freshman Kaitlin Gurganus said. ''Opinions are mixed, pretty much. I think that most people know about it, but it's not a real prominent issue outside of the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] community. Most average students aren't talking about it too much.''

Protests have been spotty, with the active gay community spending the first portion of the school year after the complaint and lawsuit became public simply trying to understand its

implications and ready for a response. The biggest anti-Portland statement came at the final home game of the season, as 40 students, staff, and faculty marched from the student center to the Bryce Jordan Center, and rallied outside the building before buying tickets to attend the game. Inside they were met with signs — whose origins they have not yet been able to pinpoint — that read ‘‘We believe in Rene.’’ T-shirts, signs, and a giant rainbow flag were brought into the arena, and accompanied the group to a student section behind the Penn State band.

‘‘I think it’s surprising that the university hasn’t at least enforced some sanction,’’ said Eric Patridge, the co-director of the Coalition of LGBTA Graduate Students and an organizer of the protest. ‘‘If you look around the country, it’s done all the time, where people step down, step aside. I think it’s sad that the women’s basketball season was allowed to persist without any conversations happening at the university. The university didn’t step forward to encourage community discussions. So, basically, the basketball season went on. Nothing would have been said about this, had the LGBT community not protested.’’

‘‘We don’t see injustice on this campus,’’ said Ed Rowe, a Penn State junior and president of Allies, the largest gay support group on campus. ‘‘Particularly when it gets too close to athletics because we’re just blinded by this gung ho, go Nittany Lions, We are Penn State [feeling].’’

Outrage and, at times, fear have touched this segment of the campus. Yet, as Rowe said, the athletic fervor of the general student population has tempered the response. Most students could go either way. Portland, who, over her career, has earned the respect given to winning coaches, still draws from that. That, and a large degree of apathy, are likely why the outrage has not spread.

‘‘My question is, What is the culture in intercollegiate athletics that allows 25 years of discrimination to persist?’’ Rowe said. ‘‘It’s not just women’s basketball. [We have to address] the broader systemic problem, whether we’re talking about intercollegiate athletics or the university as a whole. When you look at the university back away from it’s own nondiscrimination policy, the ramifications are quite dangerous.’’

And that is where the issue veers away from athletics. Leaders in the LGBT community expressed concerns over their personal protections, and especially for staff and nontenured faculty, based on the university’s motion to dismiss. Could Portland’s saga, in the end, put a dent in the nondiscrimination policy that Penn State has touted for 15 years?

Questions linger. And, while a few members of the LGBT community publicly ask them, the rest of the Penn State campus continues with its daily business. For, as always in March, there are college basketball games to watch. Games that, unlike the futures of Jennifer Harris and Rene Portland and women’s basketball at Penn State, have clear-cut winners and losers.

So the students shrug. Another game has come on. And, to them, at this moment, that’s all that’s important.

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