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**National Center for Lesbian Rights Files Federal Discrimination Lawsuit on Behalf of Former Penn State Basketball Star Jennifer Harris: Complaint Names Coach Rene Portland, Athletic Director Tim Curley, and Penn State as Defendants**

(HARRISBURG, PA) – The National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) and the law firm of Hangley Aronchick Segal & Pudlin filed a lawsuit today in federal district court in Pennsylvania on behalf of former Penn State women’s basketball star Jennifer Harris against Lady Lions basketball coach Rene Portland, among others. The complaint alleges that, despite Harris’ outstanding performance as a student athlete during her two-year career at Penn State from 2003 to 2005, Coach Portland repeatedly inquired about Harris’ sexual orientation, pressured Harris to change her appearance to be more “feminine,” harassed and targeted Harris and other African American athletes, and eventually told other players not to associate with Harris. In 2005, Coach Portland abruptly told Harris to find somewhere else to play.

The complaint names Coach Portland, Athletic Director Tim Curley, and Penn State as defendants and alleges they violated numerous federal and state laws and constitutional protections prohibiting discrimination based on race, gender, and sexual orientation. In addition to seeking damages, Harris asks the court to order Penn State to conduct mandatory non-discrimination training for all athletic department employees, as well as create new policies to help student athletes report discrimination without fear of retaliation.

“My departure from Penn State was very painful,” said Harris. “I struggled with whether I should just walk away and try to forget what happened. I finally realized that I could never put this incident behind me.”

Harris is a six-foot guard from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. She graduated in 2003 as the most decorated player in Central Dauphin High School history, and still holds the school record as all time leading scorer. Among other honors, Harris was named a 2003 McDonalds, WBCA, Nike, *USA Today*, and Blue Chip All-American, Gatorade 2003 Pennsylvania High School Player of the Year, and was a four-year member of the National Honor Society and President’s Academic

Award recipient. Harris was also a star player at Penn State, where she was among the Lady Lions' leading players on scores, assists, and steals during her 2005 sophomore season. According to the complaint, this is not the first time Penn State has been asked to take action in the wake of reports that Coach Portland has a longstanding "no drinking, no drugs, no lesbians" policy. The complaint notes that Portland created a stir in 1986 after she told the *Chicago Sun Times* she does not allow lesbians on her team, and again in 1991 when reports surfaced in the press. Harris' complaint alleges that although Penn State officially added sexual orientation to the school's non-discrimination policy, Ms. Portland has continued to discriminate against athletes and staff whom she suspects of being gay, and that Penn State failed to take any action.

"I am proud of Jennifer Harris for speaking out and for speaking on behalf of those of us who were too afraid when we were targeted," said former Lady Lions player Cindy Davies, who, according to a recent ESPN news report, played with the team in 1980 and, the complaint alleges, was forced from the team after Coach Portland threatened to "out" her to her parents and the media if she found out she was gay and did not quit the team.

Courtney Wicks, who played on the team in 1996 and 1997, said, "I often heard Coach Portland make derogatory comments about lesbians. During a trip to Seattle, she made comments about lesbians in the stands and how she didn't want lesbians on her team. Her comments were often focused on African Americans and I found that particularly offensive."

"As explained in more detail in Jennifer's complaint, Coach Portland's decades long practice of engaging in deliberate discrimination on the basis of actual and perceived sexual orientation, gender, and race has continued virtually unabated despite the harm to players and staff," said Harris' attorney, NCLR Regional Counsel Karen Doering. "We are hopeful this lawsuit will serve as a catalyst for a new era of inclusiveness and respect."

Harris has now taken her high-powered game to James Madison University where she is coached by Kenny Brooks. Because of NCAA transfer rules, Harris must sit out the 2005-2006 season before she is eligible to play her junior and senior seasons.

The case is *Jennifer E. Harris v. Maureen T. Portland, Timothy M. Curley, and the Pennsylvania State University*.

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**The National Center for Lesbian Rights** is a national legal resource center committed to advancing the rights and safety of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their families through litigation, public policy advocacy, and public education. We can be reached through our website at [www.nclrights.org](http://www.nclrights.org).