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Former Player Files Discrimination Complaint Against
Penn State Coach Rene Portland

(Philadelphia) -- The National Center for Lesbian Rights and the law firm of Hangley Aronchick Segal & Pudlin are filing a complaint today with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission on behalf of former Penn State women's basketball star Jennifer Harris against Lady Lion basketball coach Rene Portland. 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's sexual orientation, pressured Harris to change her appearance to be more "feminine," harassed and targeted Harris and other black 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. It alleges that they violated the Pennsylvania Fair Educational Opportunities Act by subjecting Harris to ongoing acts of harassment and discrimination beginning in late 2003 and continuing until she finally received her release from Penn State in June 2005 and beyond. Shortly after Harris sent a letter to Penn State indicating that she intended to take legal action, Portland retaliated by issuing a false and defamatory statement attacking Harris's academic and athletic performance at Penn State.

NCLR brought today's complaint with the help of Sharon F. McKee of Hangley Aronchick Segal & Pudlin, who has agreed to act as co-counsel in the case. "We are thrilled that Ms. McKee and her firm have agreed to join us as co-counsel in this case," said NCLR Regional Counsel Karen Doering. "Hangley Aronchick Segal & Pudlin is one of the premier law firms in this area, and Ms. McKee's litigation savvy and experience with discrimination cases against educational institutions will be a perfect compliment to our legal team."

On October 11, 2005, NCLR sent Penn State President Graham Spanier a letter outlining Ms. Harris's allegations against Coach Portland and offering to meet with the University to discuss a possible amicable resolution of the matter without the need for litigation. Three days later, Coach Rene Portland retaliated by issuing a public statement through the Penn State Athletic Department's media department attacking Harris. In response to demands by NCLR, Penn State clarified that Coach Portland's statement was her own personal statement and not a reflection of the University's position, but refused to sanction Portland for issuing the statement. Since that time, Penn State has given NCLR assurances that it intends to conduct a serious investigation of Harris' allegations.

"We are encouraged that Penn State has distanced itself from Coach Portland's defamatory statement and has committed to conducting a full and fair investigation into Ms. Harris's claims; however, we are proceeding cautiously," said Doering. "We have filed a discrimination complaint with the State and are prepared to file suit in federal court if necessary to ensure that what happened to Jennifer Harris does not happen to any other students."

The National Center for Lesbian Rights is a national law firm with a primary commitment to advancing the rights and safety of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their families. For more information about NCLR, visit www.nclrights.org.