

Group to sue Penn State for anti-gay bias

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The National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) plans to sue Penn State University on behalf of a former Lady Lions basketball player who says her coach's anti-gay bigotry led to harassment and forced her off the team.

Karen Doering, the regional counsel for the NCLR, told the PlanetOut Network she will file the suit on behalf of Jen Harris "either next week or the following week," since Penn State refused to retract an inflammatory statement from Coach Rene Portland by Wednesday's deadline.

Harris has accused Coach Portland of forcing her off the team in March because the coach believed Harris was a lesbian. NCLR has also charged Portland with decades of discrimination, adhering to a "no lesbians" policy for her team, despite Penn State policy forbidding discrimination based on sexual orientation.

In a strongly worded denial last week, Portland described Harris as a player with poor grades and a bad work ethic. "She engaged in disrespectful, profane and belligerent behavior toward coaches and teammates, and she exhibited a work ethic and attitude that were unsatisfactory and detrimental to the success of our team," Portland said.

Doering said the statements amounted to a character attack and "contained a number of blatantly false statements." They also became grounds for a lawsuit.

"There is no way Jen is considered struggling academically. She has a strong 3.0 G.P.A.," Doering said. "As far as Jen's play on the court, her sophomore year, she was one of the team's leading scorers. From second grade to the present she has dedicated her time practicing. She has an incredible work ethic."

"Jen had a very close relationship with her teammates. The only dissensions with the teammates occurred when her coach instructed her teammates not to associate with her," Doering said.

Doering described Rene Portland as "the anti-gay poster child."

"She's infamous for her negative recruiting where she tells players and parents she does not allow gay players on her team. She's notorious for harassing and kicking off players who she thinks are lesbians or who fit her stereotype of a lesbian," Doering added.

Penn State spokesman Bill Mahon told the Digital Collegian, an independent Penn state student newspaper, that NCLR has not yet given the university enough information to begin an investigation of the coach's behavior.

"Until we get some information from them, I'm not sure how a reasonable person could suggest that we have enough information to investigate," Mahon said. "All we have are press releases and headlines."

The two parties arranged a conference call on Tuesday to share information about Portland, but Doering said it was disappointing. "The feeling I was left with is that they were not serious about doing anything with Rene Portland, and they were not going to do their investigation in a timely manner."

Doering noted that since Harris identifies as straight, this case affects all athletes. "Both gay and non-gay athletes have been caught up in Rene Portland's discriminatory policy. Because once Rene decides in her head that a player is a lesbian, her career is effectively over at Penn State."

NCLR plans to cite Pennsylvania's and the United States' equal protection clauses in its lawsuit. The organization also plans to cite Title IX, which prohibits sex discrimination.

"That's what this is," Doering asserted. "Discriminating against someone because of someone's conceptions of what a woman is supposed to look like. It has been successful at the high school level, but this might be the first time it is used at the college level."

Brian Osler, director of the Gay and Lesbian Athletes Association, said this case would help other gay and lesbian athletes.

"For every case that comes to the public light, I'm sure there are several cases that don't get any notice" he told the PlanetOut Network. "Cases like this cause people to examine their beliefs and look a little deeper at the issues."