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Students organize march to stop campus hate

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UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa.— Penn State students, faculty, staff, and other allies will join forces Sunday, February, 26, to protest university administrators' inaction and collusion regarding racism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of bigotry at Penn State. The date coincides with the season's final home game for the women's basketball team.

For two decades, our university has ignored blatant discrimination on our women's basketball team, as well as in other intercollegiate, academic, and co-curricular settings. While Coach Rene Portland ruined the athletic and academic careers of players she perceived to be lesbian, Intercollegiate Athletics and the university's administration claimed ignorance.

When former Lady Lions player Jen Harris took the brave step to become the first to publicly file a complaint and subsequent lawsuit accusing Portland of discrimination, the university filed a motion to dismiss the case on the grounds that the university's nondiscrimination clause does not represent a legally binding contract. In court documents filed February 9, the university claimed, "Mere administrative provisions in a personnel manual or policy handbook simply do not rise to the level of agreement by which an employer must abide." In backtracking on this issue, the university has moved away from its professed values and policies and abandoned its students and employees by taking away their protection.

Last year, Black Caucus President Ed Smith received verbal death threats on our campus. Those responsible were never identified.

This past semester, Penn State students created an online group called "I Have AIDS and I'm Not Afraid to Use Them," replete with a logo with the slogan, "AIDS kills fags dead."

In 2004, the most recent year for which records are available, 94 sexual assaults and 22 "sex offenses" were reported at Penn State's University Park campus. According to the 1999 US Crime Victimization Survey and statistics from the PA Coalition Against Rape, only 31 to 39 percent of all rapes ever get reported to Police—that's a total of 241 to 303 sexual assaults at University Park ALONE.

The university's public relations officials—in their ever-present quest to protect the university's image by ignoring or dismissing reality—call these "isolated incidents" in shameless attempts to absolve themselves of any culpability. They deny their responsibility to create a safer environment for their students, thereby sustaining and, at times, widening the gap between the university's educational mission and the discriminatory status quo.

We have had enough. As students, faculty, staff, community members, and other allies, we refuse to follow university administrators' lead and shrug our shoulders or shake our heads. Nor do we intend to overlook continuous public statements intended to discredit those who call attention to real problems.

This land-grant, state-funded university is our university. It belongs to the students of color, to LGBT/queer students, to women students, to students who are currently silenced by fear; it is just as much our university as anyone else's, and we refuse to stand by while others' careers are ruined or lives threatened and dignity denied. Furthermore, we refuse to stand by while administrators who are currently in power retain their positions by denying their responsibility to students whose futures are being compromised by bigots.

As Coach Portland prepares to coach her 812th game on Sunday, February 26, we will take the opportunity to express our disapproval of complacent university administrators and majority student body who allow blatant hatred and bigotry to fester on our campus at the expense of *every* student's education and dignity.

On February 26, we will march from the Pollock Road entrance of the HUB-Robeson Center to the Bryce Jordan Center, gathering at the HUB at 12:30 p.m. and beginning the march promptly at 1 p.m. We will then have opportunities to protest outside the Center or to attend the game with "We support our LGBTQ athletes" and other similarly-themed apparel and accessories. The game starts at 2 p.m.

All are welcome to join us in our call for administrators to be held accountable to our own non-discrimination policies. We will be partnering with a number of groups at Penn State, at other schools' campuses, and beyond the academic world.

Note: A helpful collection of articles and other information on Portland's history of bigotry and discrimination has been posted online by a separate group, the Penn State Pride Alliance, and is available at http://www.clubs.psu.edu/up/psupride/news.html