

Press Release

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS CALLS ON PENN STATE TO RETRACT FALSE STATEMENTS OR FACE LITIGATION

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(PHILADELPHIA, PA) – The National Center for Lesbian Rights sent a letter to Penn State President Dr. Graham Spanier today demanding that the University publicly retract the retaliatory statement issued last Friday October 14, 2005 by Penn State women’s basketball coach Rene Portland.

“It is shocking that an institution of Penn State’s caliber would respond to the serious legal issues raised by Ms. Harris not by investigating her claims, but rather by launching a malicious and retaliatory public campaign to falsely smear the reputation of a dedicated young athlete and student,” said Harris’s attorney, NCLR Regional Counsel Karen Doering.

The October 14, 2005 statement contains numerous defamatory statements about Ms. Harris as an athlete and a student. These statements are belied by the public record of Ms. Harris’ exemplary athletic and academic record at Penn State. They also are flatly contradicted by public statements lauding Ms. Harris’ dedication and performance made by Coach Portland and members of her coaching staff as recently as the end of last season, immediately prior to Harris’ unlawful termination from the Penn State women’s basketball team. The University’s statement also includes false and discriminatory remarks about Ms. Harris’ attitude and work ethic. These remarks are not only false, they are based on offensive stereotypes that are a continuation of Coach Portland’s prior harassment of Ms. Harris based on her race, gender, and perceived sexual orientation.

If Penn State does not issue a retraction by Wednesday, October 19, 2005, Harris will abandon her attempt to settle this matter pre-suit and will file a lawsuit against Coach Portland and the University that will include not only her original discrimination claims, but retaliation and defamation claims as well.

Contrary to the false claims in the October 14 statement, while playing at Penn State and majoring in psychology and pre-med, Ms. Harris maintained approximately a 3.0 GPA and was among the team leaders in scoring, assists and steals during her 2005 sophomore season. Despite Ms. Harris’ high performance, Coach Portland accused Harris of being a lesbian, harassed Harris for the way she looked and dressed, and eventually terminated her from the team because of her race, gender, and perceived sexual orientation. On October, 11, 2005, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, which represents Harris in this matter, sent a letter to Penn State asking the University to meet to discuss a possible amicable resolution. After initially agreeing to meet with NCLR and to investigate Ms. Harris’ claims, the University reneged on its commitment and instead issued a public statement attacking Ms. Harris. Under both federal and state law, it is against the law to retaliate against a person who has alleged discrimination. It is also against the law to make false statements defaming a person’s reputation.

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.