

Proud To Play - East Lansing LGBT Community Sends A Message

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By Christine (available at <http://christinebarry.com/>)

MSU Lady Spartans took on Penn State Lady Lions Thursday, Jan 5 in East Lansing. The Spartans prevailed that night in a 75-53, but for many people the real victory was achieved in the stands.

Supporters of the LGBT community filled the Breslin Student Events Center with shirts of lavender and home-made signs of support for Penn State women athletes. The turnout was inspired by former Penn State women's basketball star Jennifer Harris, who played for Penn State from 2003–2005. Harris alleges that Penn State Lady Lions Coach Rene Portland harassed her and ultimately cut her from the team as part of Portland's personal "no lesbians" policy. Although Harris is not a lesbian, she claims that being perceived as such was enough to get her bounced off the team. Harris has filed a discrimination lawsuit against Portland and Penn State as a result.



Can you hear us now?

Portland supporters have a history of marginalizing protesters; ignoring the protests and calling activists "non-existent". It's safe to say that the East Lansing LGBT community wasn't so easily dismissed. In addition to The State News and Pridesource.com, the event generated mainstream media coverage through WLNS channel 6, WILX channel 10, and the Lansing State Journal. One Lansing resident created awareness of the issue by working her way through the stands wearing signs that read "shameless bigot" and "fire me". "I think that our presence was definitely noticed by other fans, and both teams", said Megan Gallagher, one of the organizers.



The fans and the two teams weren't the only ones who were paying attention. Campus Police and East Lansing Police Department assigned extra officers to work the game, and the band and student seating in the arena was reversed. A last minute change put the Penn State bench as far away from the student section as possible. For the first time this season, Breslin Student Event Center Security conducted random physical searches of spectators, and Coach Portland received an escort when she traveled between the locker room and the bench.

This reaction was in stark contrast to the activists' positive messages of support: "We hope that all who are involved in organized sports, particularly women's sports, take notice that all athletes are valued, regardless of their sexual orientation." Said Penny Gardner, Program Director of Michigan Equality. "We are in support as well of Jennifer Harris' lawsuit against Coach Portland and Penn State. "The hand-made signs in the stands were also positive in nature. There were no disparaging words, no personal attacks. The most strongly worded sign read "No Discrimination."

MSU was the first

Though the Penn State LGBT community has held multiple demonstrations at home, the MSU game was the first protest that Coach Portland faced on the road. Penn State University student Ed Rowe was pleased with the turnout in East Lansing. "It's encouraging to know that others around the country are passionate about

fixing the problem of homophobia in collegiate athletics, and I know it energized me to do more at Penn State.”

Rowe is a member of the Penn State Rainbow Roundtable, a non-sanctioned group whose purpose includes holding Penn State University accountable to its own non-discrimination policies. Last December, the Rainbow Roundtable created binders filled with information about the Harris-Portland issue, and distributed them to the LBGTA groups at other Big Ten schools. The binders were called *Action 53 Toolkits*, out of respect to Jennifer Harris, who wore number 53 when playing for Penn State. The East Lansing and Michigan State University communities were the first to answer the call for support.

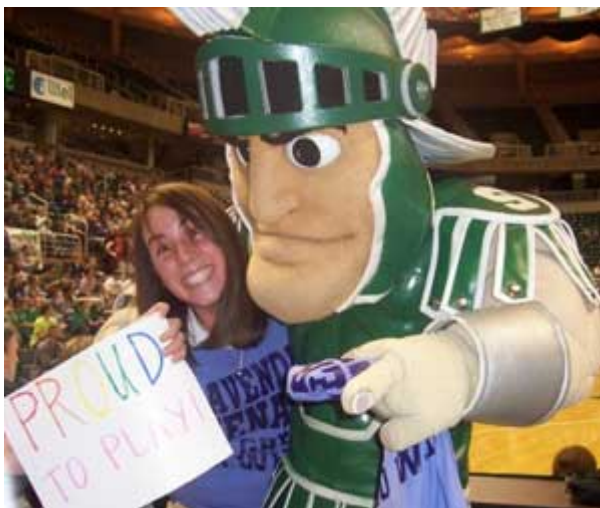
Rowe hopes that other universities will follow in the steps of MSU. “Now that they have our information binders, we hope that more schools will be able to accomplish something along the lines of what Michigan State did.”

It takes a village

Megan Gallagher credits the success of the MSU protest to many different people. “This protest was organized mainly through word of mouth, no organization at MSU officially ran it, although many people from various campus groups were there.” The non-MSU community was also important to the success of the event. Penny Gardner of Michigan Equality was instrumental in getting supporters to the game, and her “Lavender Menace” t-shirts were very popular with the fans. Pridesource was a source of information for the members of the LGBT community who are not affiliated with MSU or any other organizations. Many people received word of the protest through progressive action email alerts.



Still, university groups are the best hope for initiating demonstrations at upcoming Penn State games, and they should expect to be called on for support. “In support of the Penn State LGBT organization that protests at all of Penn State’s home games we want all the Big Ten schools to protest against Penn State at their away games.” said Gardner. Rowe and other Penn State students are in the process of following up with other universities to encourage demonstrations.



A little something for themselves

In gathering to show their support for the Penn State athletes, the protesters drew strength and inspiration from each other as well. One woman was moved by all of the lavender and rainbow colored shirts in the arena. “It was a beautiful thing.” Another was inspired by the rainbow umbrella that Penny Gardner held during the game. “To me that signifies that we are all under the umbrella and in it together. The rainbow signifies that everyone belongs, no matter your race, color, creed, political or sexual persuasion. It doesn’t matter if your straight, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender or Barney the purple dinosaur, we are all in this together.”

Bottom line: the activists had a great time. “Sparty even hung out with us. It was awesome.”

Note: Special thanks to Kristi Bartholomew and Megan Gallagher for the pictures used in this article.