

## Aldon James Forced to Watch National Arts Club Meeting on Basement TV

May 2, 2012 | By Amy Zimmer, DNAinfo News Editor



GRAMERCY PARK - O. Aldon James, the former president of the National Arts Club, watched the board's annual meeting Tuesday night on a television in the basement of the Gramercy Park building, hidden from view of the club's members.

James had reigned over the National Arts Club for 25 years before stepping down last year amid investigations by the Attorney General and District Attorney's office into alleged financial mismanagement.

He had to watch the board's proceedings on a television because he is barred from the club's common spaces.

His ban from the club he once presided over - with near total control, many board members said- came after a topsy-turvy series of legal rulings.

First, the board had voted to expel James in February after holding an internal hearing. Then it saw its decision overturned by a Manhattan Supreme Court justice in March before an appellate judge reversed that order last month.

James had asked for permission to speak at Tuesday's meeting, one member said, but it was not immediately clear what the club had ruled. In the commotion of signing in hundreds of members, James rescinded his request.

A group of James' supporters, led by former board member and former finance chair for the Senate Democrats, Bill Samuels, had proposed five amendments to the club's constitution. Among the amendments were changes to how board members are elected, which raised eyebrows among many members especially since James had once told DNAinfo that he vowed to take "back the club."

But all of the amendments, including ending the practice of letting board members rent apartments at the Gramercy Park landmark, which has roughly 40 homes, were overwhelmingly voted down.

The apartments at 15 Gramercy Park South have long been a point of contention at the club under James' tenures during which several board members held apartments in the club, for which they paid sub-market rates or nothing at all.

James, for instance, paid \$1,143 a month in rent for an apartment and his brother paid \$356 a month, according to tax filings. They controlled several other apartments, which they used to hoard junk.

Current club president Dianne Bernhard - who was James' deputy - also has an apartment in the club that costs \$7,600 a month.

James left the basement viewing room before the nearly four-hour meeting ended.

"Someone stood up and said, 'It's not going to be the 'National Aldon Club' anymore. It's going to be the National Arts Club, following its mission,'" said ex-board member Marguerite Yaghjian after the meeting.

She praised Bernhard for leading the club through a turbulent time when many members would like to turn their focus back to the arts.

"Dianne has been magnificent," Yaghjian said. "She's got the smarts, the organization and the love for the club."