

Aldon James Believes He Will Be 'Validated' at National Arts Club Hearing

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By Amy Zimmer, DNAinfo News Editor



Former National Arts Club President O. Aldon James, with his legal team, leaving Manhattan Supreme Court on Sept. 20. James wrote a letter to National Arts Club members in early January 2012 saying he believes he'll be "validated."
(DNAinfo/Olivia Scheck)

MANHATTAN - O. Aldon James, the embattled former president of the National Arts Club, believes he will be "validated" after board members hold its hearing next week to determine his fate at the venerable Gramercy Park institution, he wrote in a letter sent to members this past weekend.

James has had a tumultuous year after allegations, first reported by DNAinfo, emerged that he, his twin brother John James, and their friend, Steven Leitner, used club apartments to hoard flea market junk and antiques believed to have been purchased with the organization's money.

The Attorney General and Manhattan District Attorney began investigating allegations of financial mismanagement in March. That month, his board gave him a "well earned vacation" and then voted in Dianne Bernhard, who had been James' No.

2, as the new president. The board then tried to evict James, who filed a lawsuit to prevent his ouster. After a judge ruled the hearing could move forward, James' unsuccessfully appealed last week to halt the hearing. It is scheduled to begin Jan. 23 unless there is a settlement before then.

"Since taking a leave of absence from the Presidency last March I have encountered many surprises and turns in the road," James wrote in the letter to members.

Though James did not explicitly mention the hearing in the note, he added, "I want you all to know that, at the end of the day, the facts will speak for themselves and the truth will prevail, as it ultimately always does. The faith you have had in my integrity and in the work I have done for the Club and its mission these past 25-plus years, will be validated."

The famed "bird man" of Gramercy Park was in the spotlight throughout the year. He was accused of releasing into the wild exotic baby finches that later turned up dead in the tony neighborhood. More recently, he was accused of having an outburst in a board meeting, where he apparently told Bernhard, who is a cancer survivor, that he hoped she got sick again.

Amid back-and-forth legal challenges, the club filed a countersuit last month claiming that James owed the club roughly \$3 million for the misuse the nonprofit's apartments, funds and artwork. The suit alleges that the James brothers and Leitner failed "to pay appropriate rent for the multiple spaces they occupied at the Club is will be established at trial, but is believed to exceed \$1,500,000."

"Aldon is right," the club's lawyer Roland Riopelle told DNAinfo in response to James' letter to members. "The truth ultimately will come out."

The upcoming hearing could take up to a week, said Riopelle, who expects to call roughly a dozen witnesses.

Five board members will conduct the hearing and then make a recommendation to the full board to determine what, if any, discipline should be imposed.

Neither James nor his lawyer responded for comment.

Riopelle noted that if the board decides to expel James from the club - where the trio control six apartments, down from an estimated 20 - he could be reinstated if two-thirds of the board decides to do so.

The Concerned Artists and Members of the National Arts Club, which formed more than a decade ago when the 113-year-old institution was facing investigations over alleged financial mismanagement and recently re-grouped, said it was in the institution's "best interest" for James "to be suspended from membership and its benefits - including access to apartments" while a club investigation remained underway.

"Such removal would be consistent with the best practices of nonprofit institutions," the group's spokesman Ted Andrews said.