

Aldon James Vows to Take Back National Arts Club

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MANHATTAN SUPREME COURT — Former National Arts Club president O. Aldon James vowed Tuesday to take back the venerable institution at Gramercy Park, after getting a reprieve in court that delayed the push to evict him from its mansion where he currently lives.

The club's board moved earlier this month to boot James, his twin brother John, and their friend Steven Leitner from their apartments in the club's landmarked building, after DNAinfo revealed James was renting some apartments at below-market rates and using others to hoard junk.

"We're taking back the club," James told DNAinfo on the steps of Manhattan Supreme Court after the hearing. "Not me — I don't want the presidency. The club belongs to the people."

James, who was club president for 25 years until June, is currently under investigation by the Manhattan District Attorney's office and state Attorney General's office for alleged financial misdeeds while at the helm. He filed a lawsuit hoping to block the eviction of him, his brother and Leitner. They described the move as a "mean-spirited, vindictive and wrongful campaign by the National Arts Club and its directors."



Manhattan's Supreme Court Judge Carol Robinson Edmead awarded the trio an injunction to delay the hearing, which the club had previously wanted to hold this month.

The judge determined that the club's guidelines for an eviction hearing were not reasonable. She gave both parties until Oct. 3 to agree upon a time and group of individuals to visit the apartments.

The reason for the visit, to take place the following week, is to view the items inside in order to determine who owns them, she said. Edmead will also come up with a set of recommendations for the hearing's procedures.

"The fundamental issue is whether these individuals are capable of getting a fair hearing," said James' lawyer Adam Gilbert, of Nixon Peabody, in court on Tuesday.

National Arts Club lawyer Roland Riopelle, of Sercarz & Riopelle, argued that the judge would be "fundamentally trampling on the rights" of a private club if she did not allow them to make the decision on their own through a hearing.

"If the club no longer wants to associate with an individual," he said, "they have the right to have a hearing and make that determination."

After the judge's decision, Riopelle told reporters, "We are all very confident that once the facts come out, some form of discipline will be applied."

On the courthouse steps, James seemed almost giddy. He accused current club president Dianne Bernhard, who was once his No. 2, of behaving like a dictator and stabbing him in the back.

"This is an educational nonprofit," James said, "not Rome with her as the empress."

He then took a jab at Bernhard's work during the summer cleaning and renovating the club, which had a grand re-opening after Labor Day.

"Did you see what she did to that interior?" he asked. "She calls herself 'an interior decorator artist'; she's an 'ulterior designer con-artist.'"

Calls to the club for response were not immediately returned.

DNAinfo revealed in January that the three men pay well-below-market rates for their apartments in this tony enclave at 15 Gramercy Park South, which comes with a key to the exclusive green space. They have six apartments — two of which have no leases, according to a letter from Bernhard — and they've

been using them to hoard antiques and other junk — which may have been bought with club money, according to an ongoing internal investigation conducted by the club.