

## **National Arts Club fires back at James**

Says he violated court order, lied about harassment, and that club is still cleaning up spaces he hoarded

By Heather Holland



Apartment space previously controlled by Aldon James

Photos by Heather Holland, images courtesy of the National Arts Club

Over a year after insiders blew the lid on a rash of alleged illegal and bizarre activities, the National Arts Club is still in the process of shedding its old skin, whether by renovating apartments at the parkside property that were once hoarded by its former president O. Aldon James, or trying to keep him out of the club, at least while the two parties battle it out in the courtroom.

As reported in this newspaper last week, James filed a police report with the 13th Precinct on April 6, accusing the club's longtime doorman Miguel Serrano of harassing

him. Serrano, however, told this reporter after the article ran that James' version of events was an outright lie.

According to the doorman, during the time of the alleged harassment James described in the police report, it was around 11 p.m. At that time, said Serrano, he saw James talking to a group of young people near Gramercy Park. Serrano said he was closing shop when James brought the group of people into the club and started talking about the people working there, stating "Everyone's a fraud."

According to Serrano, that's when he responded, "The only fraud here is you."

Serrano also claimed he has surveillance footage proving that James is the one that has been doing the harassing.

"This is what he does. He wants to be in your face," said Serrano. "I know exactly what kind of person he is. He fired me from here and called me a thief, but I came back and proved that I am not a thief. He is a thief."

James previously told this reporter that, in one incident, Serrano continued snapping photos of him even after Serrano was asked to stop. Serrano, however, responded by saying that incident happened when the club was just reopening after the summer in September. He said "everything was clean and new," and he was taking photographs of the club and not James.

James did not respond to T&V's requests for comment for this article.

### **In the courts**

In March, State Supreme Court Justice Carol Edmead issued an order that annulled the expulsion of the "James Group" (James as well as his twin brother John and friend Steve Leitner) from the club. She'd agreed with the argument of the James Group that an internal hearing which resulted in the expulsion was unfair because of a lack of an unbiased arbitrator.

In turn, the club made a motion to overturn that order in Appellate Court last Wednesday, hoping to keep the expulsion, and Justice Richard Andrias agreed to stay the results of the hearing, and keep the James Group at bay, at least for a little while. This order to keep the results of the club's internal hearing is an interim stay, which means that it will only be in effect until briefings between the two parties are completed. The court is expected to decide next week whether this interim stay should remain in place.

Meanwhile, Aldon James was spotted attending a "Dutch Treats Club" meeting on Tuesday afternoon, which was hosted at the National Arts Club. By doing so, he violated the court order that expels him from the club, said the club's attorney, Roland Riopelle, because an expulsion means that James may not enter the club for any reason, even if it is to attend a function held there.

### **Club apartments still being cleaned up**

Of the 14 club apartments that the James Group took over during Aldon James' reign at the National Arts Club, eight have already been released to the club, but four are still controlled by the Jameses and Leitner. Two, however, were returned to the club this month and are undergoing badly needed renovation work.

Photos NAC President Dianne Bernhard shared with Town & Village depicted the condition of the spaces before club staffers cleared them out, which in the case of one studio apartment (6A), was not only piled high with trash and trinkets but had a bathroom floor caked in feces and urine, with roach traps scattered on the tile and a bathtub that was filled to the brim with Aldon James' belongings.

"I'm not sure how he shaved or bathed," said Bernhard.

In the main room of the studio, a gaping hole in the northwest corner of the wood floor, left pipes and concrete underneath it exposed.

According to Bernhard, the exposed pipe kept leaking into the apartment below, but James didn't want it fixed so that he could collect the insurance money.

The plumbing in both apartments (10A and 6A) are in need of repair, according to the club's superintendent, and all the kitchen appliances and cabinets in 10A are in need of replacement. 10A is also a studio apartment that's about 300 square feet. Both are still undergoing renovation and won't be ready to live in until around July 1, said Bernhard.

Renovations for apartment 10B, another studio, is completed; it's furnished and ready to live in, but according to Riopelle, this room will be used as a transient room, rented out on a day-to-day basis to club members who aren't local, in order to maximize revenue. When this reporter asked Bernhard how many rooms the James Group had used during their stay at the club, she counted them out loud, indicating each room by name (the bird room, the china closet, think tank, penthouse, etc.). During James' administration, the James Group used about 14 apartments, and 27 member spaces to hoard things in, and the only rooms remaining under their names now are one-bedroom apartments with about 700 square feet each.

"This institution is worth saving," said Bernhard after a stroll through the club's evolving spaces. "This institution is bigger than Aldon James."



Transient room

Photos by Heather Holland, images courtesy of the National Arts Club



Apartment space previously controlled by Aldon James

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O. Aldon James at a National Arts Club event on Tuesday  
Photos by Heather Holland