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Arts Club's Ex-President May Return, Judge Rules

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Astrid Stawiarz/Getty Images

The National Arts Club, on Gramercy Park in Manhattan, was led for 25 years by O. Aldon James Jr.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Mr. James has been accused of stealing from the club.

The public sparring between the National Arts Club and its former president will continue for at least another round, a New York State Supreme Court judge ruled on Thursday. In a setback for the club's board, the court struck down the board's Feb. 16 decision to terminate the membership of O. Aldon James Jr. and to remove him from his apartments in the club's residence. Also reinstated are Mr. James's twin brother, John, and a longtime friend and ally, Steven U. Leitner.

The James group, as they are known in court papers, live to fight — and sue — another day.

"It was a nice win," said Adam Gilbert, a lawyer for Mr. James. The two celebrated with a drink at the club's Victorian bar on Thursday night, to the consternation of their opponents.

"He was jumping around, hugging and kissing people," said Cherry Provost, a board member and 20-year member of the club, who has accused Mr. James of stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars from the club and said she had given evidence to the state attorney general's office.

"I'm at a level of speechlessness about this," Ms. Provost said, adding that the club's lawyer had advised her not to speak to the news media or to club members.

"Guess what?" she added. "He's getting away with it. He'll be a member. It just sickens me."

Mr. James, known around the Gramercy Park neighborhood for his bow ties and rose-colored glasses, ran the club from 1986 until last summer, when he was ousted amid accusations that he had used club money and property for his own benefit, and that he and his brother had harassed members and employees. The club's financial operations under his reign are under investigation by the state attorney general and the Manhattan district attorney, according to the club's lawyers.

The sparring stirred up unflattering revelations about the brothers, including detailed accounts of their compulsive hoarding. Photographs of multiple apartments and offices filled to the rafters with flea market artifacts were circulated on the Internet. The board charged that Mr. James had bought many of the artifacts using club checks, and that his misuse of money and apartments cost the club more than \$2 million in the last six years.

Supporters of Mr. James say he transformed a sleepy institution mired in debt into a thriving club with a growing membership and a positive balance sheet. His critics, they say,

want to usurp the James group's prime apartments for themselves, a charge the board members deny.

In February, the club's board of governors seemed to have closed the matter when it voted to expel Mr. James, his brother and Mr. Leitner. The James group and their lawyers did not attend the disciplinary hearing or present a defense, calling the board a "kangaroo court" whose members were already biased against Mr. James and were acting as both accusers and jury.

On Thursday, Justice Carol R. Edmead of State Supreme Court ruled that the board could not impartially decide the James group's fate. In overturning its disciplinary ruling, the judge ordered the parties to try the matter again in front of a neutral third party, but gave no instructions on how to choose one.

The club's lawyer, Roland Riopelle, said neither he nor the board members would comment now.

Mr. James's lawyer, Mr. Gilbert, said, "I'm now hopeful that with a neutral fact-finder examining the evidence you will see a very different outcome than the one delivered by the existing board."

Of his client's compulsive habits, Mr. Gilbert offered: "Is he a hoarder; does he have a cluttered office? Yes. But the same people who say, 'I went into his office and I couldn't believe what I saw' are the same people who are his biggest supporters."

Unrelated to the court decision, 10 club members loyal to Mr. James proposed a series of amendments on Thursday to the club's constitution, including a prohibition against club residents serving on the board of governors, a potential conflict of interest. The group said Mr. James's successor, Dianne Bernhard, who lives in the building, had become the despot she accused Mr. James of being.

"Since June 1, management of the club has refused to give the board any financial information," said William Samuels, a former board member. "It's bad. It's very bad. It's shocking."

But for Mr. James's critics, the prospect of more hearings meant that the damage to the club would continue.

Robert Seyffert, a member of a group called the Concerned Artists and Members of the National Arts Club, which formed a decade ago to protest Mr. James's actions, called the decision "disappointing and pretty depressing."

"The morale of many members and staff is going to be hurt by this, and that could lead to real jeopardy," he said.