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After Ugly Public Spat, Elite Arts Club Votes to Banish Its Ex-President

By JOHN LELAND

The tortured relationship between the National Arts Club and its colorful longtime president, O. Aldon James Jr., moved one step closer to a full-fledged divorce on Thursday evening, as the club's board of governors voted to terminate his membership and evict him from his apartment in the club residence.



O. Aldon James Jr.

At the club's elegant Victorian mansion, with three security guards standing watch in the hall, the board also voted to expel Mr. James's identical twin brother, John T. James, and Steven Leitner, a longtime member and family friend.

As with many divorces, the hostilities have been ugly and embarrassingly public, with charges that Aldon James abused club employees and members, and misspent millions of dollars, and countercharges that board members were secretly, and not so secretly, conspiring to seize his apartments for themselves.

“The healing process will take some time,” Roland G. Riopelle, a lawyer for the club, said after the two-hour meeting. “I don’t think the process is going to be easy. Whether this means the club’s nightmare is really over is up to Aldon, John and Steven Leitner.”

The dispute will continue in the courts, where the James group already has two lawsuits pending against the board and individual members of the board — including one charging that the board wasted hundreds of thousands of dollars in trying to oust Mr. James. The three have not been living in their club apartments on Gramercy Park since last year.

“Expulsion is a cruel coda for a man who devoted his life to the club, without pay,” said Gerald L. Shargel, a lawyer for the James group. “All of this comes on the basis of false allegations.”

The three chose not to attend a disciplinary hearing in January, which all but sealed the board’s vote on Thursday.

“We knew it was a kangaroo court,” Mr. Shargel said. “All witnesses called were hostile to the Jameses and Steven Leitner. There was no point in appearing.”

The negative publicity from the feud, including the posting of photographs of overly cluttered apartments online, exposed the James brothers’ compulsive hoarding habits, which many club members believe are portrayed in the book “Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things,” by Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee. The book describes two rich, bow-tied twins named Alvin and Jerry. (Mr. Frost would not comment.)

The board charges that the James brothers filled as many as 20 apartments, offices and temporary rooms with their accumulated stuff, much of it bought at flea markets with club money, and cost the club around \$1.5 million in lost rent and \$600,000 in cash over the last six years.

Yet Mr. James has maintained ardent supporters, who credit him with building club membership and keeping the place lively and fiscally solvent. Under his successor, Dianne Bernhard, the club had to cancel this year’s Valentine’s Day Red Ball because of a lack of interest, said Marguerite Jossel, a board member.

Richard Ward, a longtime club member, compared the place under Mr. James to a creative if sometimes chaotic family, and said Mr. James deserved better treatment.

“In a family, you should take care of the eccentric uncle, not put him out in the cold,” Mr. Ward said.

Pat Hackett, a board member who sided with the James group, said the feud had irreparably damaged the club that Mr. James built. “They’re killing the club, but they don’t care,” she said. “They can eat the carcass for a long time. It’s tragic because it’s so transparent.”