

January 24, 2012

Aldon James Skips Hearing on His Eviction from National Arts Club

By Amy Zimmer

MANHATTAN - It was supposed to be a day of reckoning for O. Aldon James at the National Arts Club, but he wasn't there for it.

The club's board kicked off its internal hearing on Monday to determine whether to evict its ex-president from the several apartments he has inside the 113-year-old Gramercy Park institution. James, however, never showed up, according to people who were at the closed-door proceedings.

The hearing went on nevertheless.

It is being conducted by five NAC board members, who will make a recommendation to the full board to determine what, if any, discipline should be imposed on James, his twin brother, John James, and their friend Steven Leitner. James' attorney also skipped the hearing.

As first reported by DNAinfo, the James brothers and Leitner used club apartments to hoard flea market junk and antiques - believed to have been purchased with the organization's money. The trio are currently under investigation by the state Attorney General's office and the Manhattan District Attorney's office, and the club's board decided to hold an eviction hearing for the three.

A September hearing had been delayed when the trio filed a lawsuit to prevent their ouster. A Manhattan Supreme Court judge set Monday as the new date for the eviction hearing, after issuing revised guidelines for the hearing.

The three control six of the club's roughly 40 apartments, according to the club. At one time, they had an estimated 20 apartments.

For their prime real estate - with a key to the exclusive Gramercy Park - Aldon

James paid \$1,143 a month in rent, his brother paid \$356 a month and Leitner paid \$858 a month, according to recent tax filings first reported on by DNAinfo.

The club claimed in a countersuit filed last month 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." And that's just for the past five years because of a statute of limitations.

Aldon James, who was at the club's helm for 25 years and is largely credited with raising the organization's profile, was given a "well earned vacation" from his role in March, when the Attorney General and Manhattan District Attorney began investigating allegations of financial mismanagement. The board later voted in Dianne Bernhard, who had been James' No. 2, as the new president.

James, who was known to have clamped down on his board when they asked questions about the running of the institution, told DNAinfo that he vowed to "take back the club." He accused Bernhard of behaving like a dictator and stabbing him in the back. He also had an outburst in a board meeting, where he apparently told Bernhard, who is a cancer survivor, that he hoped she got sick again.

James and the club's lawyers did not return calls for comment on Monday night's hearing.

"This was a woman who stepped into an impossible situation, and, first of all, physically cleaned up the place with pans and elbows flying," former board member Marguerite Yaghjian said of Bernhard after she testified at Monday's hearing.

"She was just trying to do what was right and what was the governors' responsibility," Yaghjian said, adding that board members had not known about the hoarding and the multiple apartments that the trio were keeping.

"That deprived the club of money that could have been used for scholarships or other things," Yaghjian said. "It's criminal."