

## Hiatus Is Set for Leader of Arts Club

By James Barron

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The venerable National Arts Club said on Monday that its longtime president would take a vacation, a time-off that the club's first vice president, who will serve as the acting president, called a leave of absence.



O. Aldon James Jr.

Word of the change came eight days after dozens of baby finches were apparently abandoned in Gramercy Park, the two-acre oasis across from the club, and newspaper stories linked the president, O. Aldon James Jr., to the incident.

Dianne Bernhard, the acting president, said that the club's board of governors was not happy about the publicity. But she said that the finches — apparently left in the park and endangered by a heavy rainstorm — were not the only reason that the board gathered for an emergency meeting on Monday night.

“We’ve had a barrage of newspaper articles, complaints from board members, members, tenants, staff neighbors,” she said. “We had disgruntled employees who were fired, and this last episode of the birds in the park. We felt like there was so much information out there that we didn’t know which was fact and which was fiction, and we needed to get to the bottom of it.”

Referring to Mr. James, she said that he had told the board “he would be willing to take a leave of absence and take a vacation,” Ms. Bernhard said. Mr. James did not return a call for comment last night.

A statement from the board said Mr. James had “requested that the board of governors spend the next couple of months looking into how we can improve our operational structure while he will be taking a well-earned vacation.”

Mr. James, 63, has presided over the club since the mid-1980s. More than once he has feuded with the Gramercy Park Trust, which looks after the famous park where keys to the iron gates have been issued since the days of Washington Irving. Over the years he took issue with the park’s trustees for cutting down trees and, he said, for poisoning birds and squirrels.

In 2002, the club’s dining room manager pleaded guilty to stealing \$163,000 that was supposed to go for sales taxes on meals.

Mr. James’s brother, John T. James, pleaded guilty in 2003 to misusing the club’s tax-exempt status to purchase expensive jewelry —which he resold at a profit — without paying sales taxes. He was sentenced to five years’ probation. John James agreed to pay \$469,213 in restitution and \$60,000 in fines in the jewelry case.

The city’s financial investigation ended in 2004 when the club agreed to pay hotel occupancy taxes of roughly \$150,000. The club has rooms that members can reserve.

Mr. James, who has said in the past that he keeps exotic birds in his quarters at the club, was quoted last week as denying releasing the finches in the park, and saying he had tried to rescue some of them.

“He was not going to let them die out on the street,” Ms. Bernhard said. “I mean, he is an avid animal lover.”