

# National Arts Club Letter Chronicles Aldon James' Departure

September 6, 2011



Dianne Bernhard took over as president of the National Arts Club in June after O. Aldon James was ousted from the position. (National Arts Club)

GRAMERCY — Days after O. Aldon James filed a lawsuit against the National Arts Club, the club's current president, Dianne Bernhard, sent an 1,800-word letter to club members outlining in detail the controversial events that have unfolded over the past six months.

"It has been a complicated, often painful time that has required a lot of hard work on the part of the board, staff, and many members," Bernhard wrote in the letter dated Sept. 2.

"It is a particularly difficult period as, for many years, Aldon James has been our friend," Bernhard continued. "However, the gravity of the charges and the considerable impact his actions have had on each of us — financially, personally, and in regard to our club's mission — has led to feelings of betrayal."

James, along with his twin brother, John, and their family friend, Steven Leitner, filed suit in the New York Supreme Court last Monday in an attempt to stop efforts to expel the three men from the club and from their apartments, according to court documents.

Included in the suit was a temporary restraining order, which effectively postponed a hearing scheduled to determine the three men's fates within the organization.

In the letter to members, Bernhard, who took over the presidency in June, chronicles the events that led to the ouster of James as the club's longtime president. As DNAinfo previously reported, the James brothers and Leitner allegedly used multiple apartments in the building to hoard personal items.

An NAC investigation revealed that the three men controlled more than a dozen apartments, club rooms and other spaces, Bernhard wrote.

"These spaces were abhorrently dirty and disorganized, randomly stuffed with personal belongings, important club documents, flea market trinkets, and infested with vermin and insects," Bernhard wrote.

"While cleaning out these spaces many dead rats were found," she added.

The NAC board has reclaimed some of those rooms and enlisted the help of members and volunteers to clean out the spaces. But the James brothers and Leitner continue to control six apartments, two of which do not have leases, Bernhard wrote.

The letter also mentions the ongoing investigations into the club's finances by the state attorney general's charities bureau and the Manhattan district attorney's office.

"The law enforcement inquiries we have had to deal with are very serious and could result in sanctions and fines," Bernhard wrote.

"I feel an obligation to tell you it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the AG could appoint a Receiver to take over the Club's management," she continued. "It is also possible that the Club itself could be subjected to criminal charges."

Bernhard emphasizes throughout the letter that the board is taking dramatic steps to reform the club's operations, at one point referring to it as a "rebirthing process."

Over the past six months, Bernhard said the club has installed a closed-circuit television security system throughout the building, drafted handbooks for employees and board members, and started documenting all board meetings, "a practice which had been largely previously abandoned," Bernhard wrote.

The club has also "repaired damaged relations with our neighbors living and working around Gramercy Park," she wrote.

Bernhard told DNAinfo she wrote the letter in an effort to increase openness with club members.

"In furtherance of the Club's restored tradition of transparency with the membership, I issued the letter to update the membership as to what has transpired over the summer while the club was closed but much had been accomplished," she said.

"I did this in advance of the opening in hopes of addressing some of the things I know to be of interest to the members.