

Town & Village

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Aldon James officially gone from Arts Club

New president: We hope to make peace with community, but nymph statue is long gone

By Sabina Mollot

After the National Arts Club announced last week that its longtime president O. Aldon James, who'd stepped aside for what was called a "vacation" months ago, officially no longer held any title, numerous people in the community have expressed relief, but also wondered what would happen to the man who's been accused of abusing his position and the 113-year-old institution for over a quarter century. In particular, some wondered if he, and his twin brother, who's also been accused of harassment of club members and employees, and family friend Steve Leitner, will be allowed to stay in their apartments at the club's landmarked building, for which they pay under-market rents.

Though Dianne Bernhard, the new president, declined to comment on issues surrounding the ongoing investigations into alleged financial activities by James over the years, she did speak with Town & Village on Wednesday to say that the club wants peace with the Gramercy Park community.

She also said that the club's attorneys were working with James' attorneys on an agreement for him to "vacate," though she didn't clarify when that would be.

"The twins have lived here for 27 years," said Bernhard, "and they'll be here until they're not. Our club counsel is talking to their counsel. That's all there is to say."

As for all the birds kept in the club by James, they're already gone, "given away to bird lovers," said Bernhard.

(They left the premises not long after dozens of finches were mysteriously found dead in the park, shortly after James bought a bunch of finches.)

Bernhard didn't want to make any statements about the former president, but insisted the club's new goal is to "make peace with the neighborhood. This is an incredible, sweet, nice, little neighborhood," said Bernhard. "It doesn't deserve the stress it's been under all these years."

Additionally, although previously, an appraiser at the club sifting through its vast collection of artwork said a team would keep an eye out for a historic statue that had been placed in the club's care in 1983, according to Bernhard, the statue is long gone. The statue, of a nymph, had been

located in Gramercy Park until the park's trustees gave it to the club for safekeeping and restoration. It was last seen, badly damaged in the club's basement, in 2003.

"The statue left this place many years ago," said Bernhard. "We're working with the Gramercy Park Trustees and we're all just trying to get to the bottom of this."

When speaking about the club's general membership, which has been mostly left in the dark as far as the investigations by the district attorney and attorney general have been going, Bernhard said in the future there would be more transparency. There would be quarterly town hall meetings for members, she said, adding that the club's website was being redone to make it more useful in terms of information.

As for now, though, she remained mum on the issue of money mismanagement at the club, declining to comment on a story by DNAinfo this week that quoted from an internal report accusing James of having used the club as his own personal piggy bank for years.

Instead she would only say that the club was currently "financially healthy" and 10 vacant units in the historic property were being prepped for new tenants - who'd be paying market rate. The fair-market rents, she explained, would be determined by an appraiser and the club's executive committee. All together there are 35 apartments of varying size in the building.

"We're getting them all cleaned up," said Bernhard, who pays market rent for her own home at the club. "We have to work on the electricity and the plumbing, but it's early on in the process."

Meanwhile, though numerous people with current and former ties to the National Arts Club have told Town & Village they're enthused about changes being made, they didn't understand why James was still around.

One former member recalled that when people would ask James finance-related questions, he would refuse to answer, and, "if you started asking too much, you were out. You'd be gone."

Another former member just said, "I hope for a sensible future for the club that's not mad. If there's a sensible future, I'm delighted."

As far as the future at the club is concerned, numerous members have said they have faith in Bernhard being able to usher the club into a new era, one where the focus is on art, rather than reports of money mismanagement, bird abuse and chronic hoarding.

Bernhard is the former NAC vice president since 2006 and acting president since March.

Dr. Alex Rosenberg, a newly elected board member who's also currently overseeing the massive project of cataloguing the club's entire art collection, said in a written statement that Bernhard is "well-versed in the operational needs of the club."

"She has a strong business sense; knows the club's staff, member base and board of governors, and she is an internationally-trained painter and teacher in her own right. We are fortunate to have someone of her caliber, experience and passion take the helm."

Overall, Bernhard said she wanted the community to know, that, "We want to live up to our mission statement. We're excited about our place in the neighborhood. We're experiencing a rebirth and we want to be known as a first class arts institution. I'm just embracing this tremendous honor to lead the club."