

## **James group harassing club employees, scaring members, says NAC president**

By Sabina Mollot

As the legal battle between the current and former administration of the National Arts Club rumbles on, the historic institution's president apologized this week to members for the "burden" of the ongoing litigation and media attention, while also noting that some members have been living in fear of "personal harm." Additionally, she said, harassment of club employees by The James Group has increased since the last court decision.

In a letter signed by NAC President Dianne Bernhard that was sent to club members on Friday, she wrote:

"I am so sorry that you to have had to bear this burden - this is not what our Club should be about, nor is it. However, in the interest of complete transparency, I must tell you that the threat posed by The James Group to our Club is very real. The ongoing expense of unnecessary litigation and fear amongst Members and residents of the Club's apartments are damaging our institution. I can report that since Justice Edmead's decision, the harassment of our staff by members of The James Group has increased, and certain tenants and members feel the need to carry cell phones at all times in fear of personal harm."

The James Group is how former club president O. Aldon James, his brother John James and friend Steven Leitner are referred to in court documents. On March 22, the three men were given a second chance to keep their NAC apartments and memberships, when New York Supreme Court Justice Carol Edmead took their side in arguing the club was too biased to be fair when it voted to expel them from the club in February, based on an internal hearing. As reported by T&V last week, the court has since filed an appeal and has also asked Edmead, in another filing, to reconsider her decision.

However, in case she doesn't, the club has already nominated a potential neutral arbitrator.

"We are quite confident that our Board acted appropriately," Bernhard said in her letter, adding, "that the facts will not change even if the venue

does, and that a neutral arbiter will see them in the same light as that of the Board."

The letter then went on to discuss James supporters who've recently suggested amendments to various club policies, accusing them of "clouding the truth."

When alerting members as to an upcoming meeting on May 1, Bernhard warned that it may be disrupted by members who want to "run an alternate slate of Governors and/or propose amendments to our Constitution under the guise of doing what is in the 'best interest' of The National Arts Club. I can assure you that the individuals behind this behavior do not have the best interest of our Club in mind," she said.

"Communications you may receive are likely to be from the same people who have advocated vehemently on behalf of The James Group over the course of this season. These individuals, some of whom have served on the Board and gone on record as supporters and admirers of the past administration, care only about continuing this conflict, distracting us from our mission and clouding the truth about the past, all which ultimately inhibit our Club from healing itself."

Last week, former board member and James supporter Bill Samuels told T&V he wanted to remove any appearances of favoritism when it comes to who gets to rent apartments at the NAC's parkside building by amending club policy to disallow board members from being tenants. Along with the Jameses and Leitner, Bernhard has also had an apartment at the property for years.

Bernhard also discussed other club activity in her letter, including announcing the hiring of a general manager after a months-long search. The new GM, John Eramo, has managed a number of city clubs, Bernhard said, and he has already brought in a full-time controller, William Reader, who has over 20 years of experience in financial management. Other financial tidbits included the club voting to provide health care for employees for the first time in its history, and exploring implementation of a 401(k) plan for them.

"I encourage all of you to see the situation of the Club for what it is," Bernhard added in the letter. "More reform has taken place at The National Arts Club in the last year than has occurred in the prior twenty."

T&V's calls to the Arts Club's attorney, James' attorney and Bernhard for comment on the letter were not returned.

In related news, one club member observed that on Monday night, Aldon

James was present at a club art exhibit opening, which appeared to make Bernhard nervous.