

Town & Village

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NAC votes to expel James, but battle continues in court

By Heather Holland

The National Arts Club's Board of Governors voted to expel O. Aldon James, former president of the club, his brother John James and friend Steve Leitner from club membership last Thursday evening, citing that the group was "seriously prejudicial" to the club and that they violated club rules and policies.

This comes after a string of allegations against the so-called James Group surfaced, regarding their alleged misuse of club money and apartments and disappearing artwork, as well as harassment of members and employees. Expulsion, according to a club statement, means that the three former members are banned from the Club's common spaces, are stripped of rights and privileges of membership in the club, and are no longer permitted to serve on the Board of Governors or any committee within the club unless they are restored to membership by a vote of two-thirds by the Board of Governors.

"The board took hours to make a decision," said the Club's attorney Roland Riopelle, who did not attend the meeting, but who was delegated as the spokesperson for the Club. "From what I could tell, the meeting was taken very seriously."

Despite the formal parting-of-ways, according to Riopelle, there are still two lawsuits pending in the New York State Supreme Court, although, according to the attorney, they are mostly open due to counterclaims submitted by the James Group, whose primary complaint has been that the proceedings by the club were unfair due to members who were biased against him.

The group has also made claims relating to the election to appoint the new president of the Club, Dianne Bernhard. The election was recently voided due to lack of a quorum, though the club has yet to set a date for a new vote. Both cases were already decided in court, but according to Riopelle, the James Group isn't letting the subjects drop. In response, Gerald Shargel, an attorney for the James Group, blasted the club's board proceedings as a "kangaroo court" and said, "We will pursue all remedies that are before us."

The decision came after a hearing was held at the club last month, which lasted all day, despite the Jameses, Leitner and their attorney being no shows.

Shargel explained their absence, saying, "There were no witnesses (on behalf of the James Group) because we deliberately did not attend the meeting. I will not allow my clients to attend a meeting before a kangaroo court. This entire proceeding has been biased, hostile and unfair. The allegations against Aldon James, as well as Steve Leitner and John James are completely baseless."

Meanwhile, The Concerned Artists and Members of The National Arts Club, a group that for years has dedicated itself to reforming the structure of the club, released a statement praising the club's decision to expel the group.

"The darkest chapter in the Club's 114-year history drew to a close with the long-overdue expulsion of Aldon James, John James, and Steven Leitner," said Ted Andrews, spokesperson for the Concerned Artists and Members of The National Arts Club.

"This troika operated the club as their own personal fiefdom for 25 years. The Concerned Artists look forward to an era of genuine democracy and transparency for the Club, which can finally return to its core mission of promoting public interest in the arts and furthering the education of the American people in the fine arts."

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