



UniverSoul Circus Testimony on 1233-A before the NYC Council Health Committee  
Thursday, July 20, 2017

Thank you to Chair Johnson and members of the New York City Health Committee. Thank you also to Sponsor Rosie Mendez for this special opportunity to testify in regards to the extender bill to Intro 1233-A. My name is Ben Johnson, Director of Operations of Soul Circus, Inc., the owner of UniverSoul Circus based in Atlanta. I am here on behalf of generations of New Yorkers who have enjoyed the circus. While we philosophically disagree about the role of animals in circuses, we respect the Council's decision in passing Intro 1233-A.

Our many New York supporters are families—ranging from children to senior citizens and every age in between—who represent the true diversity and spirit of New York. Though they are not as vocal as the proponents of the bill, our tens of thousands of annual attendees speak with their ongoing support of UniverSoul Circus. As elected officials who represent our fan base, you can give voice to them by extending the implementation date of bill number 1233-A to December 31, 2020.

After considerable discussion amongst the leadership of UniverSoul Circus we have a strong desire to continue our commitment to the many communities in New York City that UniverSoul has amazed and entertained for nearly a quarter century. In 2018 UniverSoul will celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, so with this long history of performing, UniverSoul Circus will need to review how it will reinvent itself based on what the bill requires and whether or not a new rendition will be a viable show for New York City.

For a national company of UniverSoul's scale, the reconfiguration needed based on 1233-A will require extensive restructuring with vendors and performers to evaluate and assess the best path forward. Additionally, UniverSoul Circus will need to produce an entirely different show in order to comply with 1233-A, which you can imagine is no small feat. New York City is an integral market in our 10-month 16 city tour schedule. So, to have a chance at a successful transition, we need a 3-year period to adjust our business model.

UniverSoul Circus annually contributes more than \$2.5 million to the New York City economy and supports hundreds of jobs here during the two and half months we perform in this market. We also support a wide array of charities and organizations that focus on youth, seniors and underprivileged members of the community. One example of our outreach from this year's engagement was adding a special performance in Queens to host 2,100 plus clients of the Samaritan Daytop Village, a shelter for homeless families, who were uplifted by the free, exclusive show and interaction with our circus performers. They were not only entertained but were also provided complimentary food and novelties

to enhance their experience.

UniverSoul Circus will continue to follow the longstanding regulations of the USDA, New York State, and New York City, and the guidelines of the NYC Health and Mental Hygiene department which has led the nation in animal protection.

While we disagree with those who support banning exotic animals from performing in the City, we understand and respect the sincerity of those who share that view. Indeed, the ability to disagree on matters of public importance and to work toward finding a reasonable middle ground is part of what makes this country the great nation it is.

Circuses around the world have always inspired the positive, progressive movement of mankind. They are and always will be a reflection of our humanity, strength, commonality, and resilience.

Thank you again and we strongly urge the Council to extend the implementation of 1233-A to December 2020 to achieve these valuable goals.



**Samaritan  
Village**

40th St. Queens, NY

## **Samaritan Daytop Village**

13802 Queens Boulevard, Briarwood, NY 11435

Tel: 718-206-2000

[Samaritanvillage.org](http://Samaritanvillage.org)

On behalf of the homeless families of New York City, I would like to show my sincere appreciation for the UniverSoul Circus. This past April and May I had the wonderful experience of working with the Soul Circus to provide a free show for New York City's homeless population. The show included free food, drinks and toys for the 2,200 people in attendance. At a time when homelessness is on a steady incline, the value of sponsors such as UniverSoul Circus cannot be underestimated. The sheer exuberance brought to families by the UniverSoul Circus is something I will look forward to yearly, as I'm sure they will.

Samaritan Village champions the efforts of the UniverSoul Circus as we strive to improve the quality of life for New Yorkers. For over 50 years Samaritan Village has offered a rich array of health and human services, including programs for homeless individuals and families, substance abuse treatment, support for veterans and much more.

Please understand, as a tax exempt organization under Section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code it is through the generosity of sponsors such as UniverSoul Circus that Samaritan Village can be effective. Although there is no way to fully express our gratitude, at Samaritan Village we are inspired by the community dedication of UniverSoul Circus. It speaks volumes of the character of the UniverSoul Circus to address such a vital concern in New York, despite Georgia being the circus's origin.

With Gratitude,

LeBrandon Smith  
Recreation Specialist

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

*Appearance Card*

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 1233-A <sup>Extension</sup> Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor     in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Benjamin Johnson

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: UniverSoul Circus

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

◆ Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms ◆