

CNN LARRY KING LIVE

Interview With Paula Poundstone

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LARRY KING, HOST: Tonight, exclusive. Paula Poundstone, was she an unfit mother? The comedian speaks out about her child endangerment charges for the first time since the court ruled she can get her kids back. She's here for the hour along with her lawyer, Rich Pfeiffer. And we'll be taking your phone calls. And it's next on LARRY KING LIVE.

Great pleasure to welcome to LARRY KING LIVE, Paula Poundstone, the noted stand-up comic and writer, two-time Cable Ace winner, who will no doubt on December 11 regain full legal custody of her adopted children. They were taken from her after her arrest in June of 2001. That's a long time to be without kids. Now, you had foster children and adopted children, right? Foster children, they're gone, right?

PAULA POUNDSTONE, COMEDIAN: Yes.

KING: You don't get them back.

POUNDSTONE: Don't get them back.

KING: OK. Do you know you get the kids on December 11?

POUNDSTONE: Well, I don't know anything. I mean, they can do whatever they want. But it certainly looks like -- I can't imagine that they would have a leg to stand on in denying my kids return.

KING: Has it been approved, Rich? Where do we stand?

RICH PFEIFFER, PAULA POUNDSTONE'S LAWYER: The recommendations are to return the children legally. She's got..

KING: The recommendations of?

PFEIFFER: Of the social workers.

KING: To the judge?

PFEIFFER: Right. And -- but -- this is the law. Anything can happen. Until it's done, it's not done. But like Paula said, it would be an extremely remote thing for it not to happen. The children's attorney has been fighting a long time alongside of us to get the children back home where they belong.

KING: And you got to spend the weekend with them, did you not? POUNDSTONE: Got to -- yes. Got to spend the weekend with them, yes. We've had some overnights. I'm with them. There's a lot -- I -- when I'm out and about, a lot of strangers come up and talk to me about this and a lot of friends call and have been slightly misinformed, which is -- although they have not been technically in my custody, I've since December 5 of last year, I've had monitored visits which, for us, has meant that, you know, a monitor meets me at the foster home, I wake them up in the morning, I take care of them, take them to school.

KING: They're all in the same foster home?

POUNDSTONE: Yes. And I bring them back that night already scrubbed in the tub and...

KING: So you've had a lot of contact?

POUNDSTONE: Yes we have. And I don't leave until my son falls asleep.

KING: How old are they?

POUNDSTONE: Eleven, 8 and 4.

KING: Two boys and a girl?

POUNDSTONE: Two girls and a boy.

KING: Two girls and a boy.

The foster children, why did you have adopted children and foster children?

POUNDSTONE: I was a foster parent for eight years and...

KING: Before adopting?

POUNDSTONE: I fostered eight kids and I adopted three of them. I adopted when the circumstances warranted adoption. The other kids were returned to their birth families.

KING: Why? Why did you adopt? Why foster children? What...

POUNDSTONE: Well, it sounds stupid now coming from me, I suppose, but I wanted to do something I thought was important. And actually, you know, I did a good job. I mean, I did a good job until the point at which I didn't do a good job and then I made some mistakes.

KING: We'll get to that.

POUNDSTONE: And now I'm back in the saddle.

KING: Is foster parenting very different from adopting children?

POUNDSTONE: When you foster, you... KING: You know they're not yours.

POUNDSTONE: Right. The children are wards of the court and you're taking care of them until the court makes a decision about what happens with them.

KING: And the court, Rich -- with foster children, you can lose them at anytime for any reason, right?

PFEIFFER: Right. There is no legal rights to foster children. The courts do try to keep them in a same placement unless they decide it is in their best interest to move them.

KING: And some foster children get adopted eventually, right?

PFEIFFER: Quite a few do. The law changed three years ago where there is federal funds where the counties get money if there is a foster care adoption. So there's almost a bounty out on the children to terminate the parental rights and have them adopted through the foster care program.

KING: Is it tough when you -- when they take the foster children away in normal set of circumstances?

POUNDSTONE: Oh, absolutely. If you didn't --

KING: But you know you're going to lose them.

POUNDSTONE: Well, they used to have a philosophy that you weren't supposed to bond, which is so ridiculous. If you aren't...

KING: How do you not bond?

POUNDSTONE: Maybe I changed my perspective on the whole thing, honestly. Because, ironically, the situation where I am now is that my kids are, in fact, in foster care, only I'm the parent and they're in foster care. And so maybe

I, you know...

KING: Were you happy with their foster parents?

POUNDSTONE: Yes. But I haven't been happy with -- I feel like my kids haven't come up in the conversation between the -- you know, in the county in the longest time. I feel like it was reasonable for them to be returned to me a long time ago.

KING: Sooner?

POUNDSTONE: Sooner, yes.

KING: You think if you weren't Paula Poundstone they would have been?

POUNDSTONE: I don't have no idea. There's no way of isolating...

KING: Would you guess that, Rich? PFEIFFER: I do a lot of these cases and all of the abuse in this case happened when Paula had an alcohol problem, when she was intoxicated. And I have never seen a case go beyond a year of not getting your children back. It's rare that if someone is clean for eight months that they don't get their children back when they've done everything she's done.

KING: Also, you adopted children that were not healthy children, right?

POUNDSTONE: Well...

KING: Didn't each one have a problem?

POUNDSTONE: No, some of my kids have special needs.

KING: Like?

POUNDSTONE: Well, I mean, it wouldn't make you adopt or not adopt them. I didn't get, like, I didn't get like castaway goods by any means. I have wonderful...

KING: But they had some problems, didn't they?

POUNDSTONE: Yes.

KING: And most people would say I wouldn't adopt a child with problems.

POUNDSTONE: I have met people that have adopted children with problems. I don't score any extra points for that or -- listen, people should kill to have kids like mine. They have been through it. And...

KING: Boy, have they.

POUNDSTONE: And they -- you know, I know that we go through the teen years, there will be a good deal of upheaval and maybe they'll reconsider their position, but at this point in our lives, they have accepted my apology and hope beyond anything for their return.

KING: A single person, was it easy to adopt?

POUNDSTONE: Yes, it wasn't a problem.

I will say I was -- I've been a little bit surprised within this system that in a lot of the records it continues, despite asking them not to do that, it continues to say adoptive mother on a lot of the records.

And, you know, once you adopt, you are "the" mother.

KING: You are the mother.

POUNDSTONE: I am "the" mother. KING: Does this not -- foster children, adoptive children, some with problems, does this not affect your opportunity for a healthy relationship?

POUNDSTONE: Well, you know...

KING: I mean, you meet someone, they're going to say, Boy...

POUNDSTONE: Well, for a healthy -- Oh, I didn't think you meant like that. Oh, heavens, gee, yes -- well, yes, you know, pulling up in the dented van with a bunch of kids in the car isn't naturally a turn on to just everybody. But you know what? I don't care about that.

KING: You don't care about a relationship?

POUNDSTONE: No, Larry, I'll tell you something. I -- you know, I got three kids, nine cats, a dog, two tadpoles, a lizard and a bunny. I have a job. You know, I don't go to bed, I pass out. When -- the idea that there would be somebody in there I had to do something with, I shudder.

KING: So you don't want a relationship.

POUNDSTONE: I don't want a relationship. I want my kids.

KING: Rich, you've had -- this is an unusual client.

PFEIFFER: It is. And she is a wonderful client. I've had to work hard nights and weekends on her case. But it has been a joy to do that.

KING: Let's go back to the arrest. Where were you? What happened?

POUNDSTONE: I was in rehab when I was arrested.

KING: Already in rehab.

POUNDSTONE: I was in rehab.

KING: Where were the children?

POUNDSTONE: They were already in foster care. I had gone into rehab about two weeks before I was arrested. I had already gone in and talked to the police.

KING: Did you put them in foster care?

POUNDSTONE: No, I didn't put them in foster care. No, no, no. They were taken.

KING: Why were they taken then?

POUNDSTONE: They were taken because of the charges at the time of the... KING: But you said they were taken before you were arrested?

POUNDSTONE: Yes. They were taken before I was arrested.

KING: So, the charges were -- you knew you would be arrested? Give me a little...

POUNDSTONE: I didn't know I was going to be arrested.

KING: What caused them to be taken?

POUNDSTONE: Well, the -- unfortunately the facts of the case are sealed. Some of the stuff is already in the public arena.

KING: What can you tell us?

POUNDSTONE: What can I tell them?

PFEIFFER: Well, we technically can't talk about the facts of the case. And we would love to. And -- if the public knew the facts of this case...

KING: Well certainly we can test why initial charges were dropped.

They charged you with lewd conduct, right? That was dropped.

PFEIFFER: They did that, yes.

KING: Well if charges were dropped, you can certainly talk about charges that were dropped.

PFEIFFER: We can't talk about the charges of the case according to two different gag orders and two different courts. And the automatic gag order that goes with the dependency court.

What I can promise you is that, you know, Paula has no friends in that criminal court building. She has no friends at all. They dropped those charges because they couldn't prove the charges. They weren't doing her a favor. They haven't done her a favor ever since the charges were --

KING: They invented these charges? They were of thin air charges?

PFEIFFER: They were charges that they couldn't make stick.

KING: Were you shocked that you were charged with such a thing?

POUNDSTONE: Well, yes.

You know, here is what I want to make clear. I am responsible for the errors that I made that brought this to pass. I was drinking way too much. And I am -- I am so sorry. It is inexpressable.

And I have -- you know, I've been in rehab. I don't drink anymore. It's not like a recurring whatever. There was a child endangerment charge. There was a misdemeanor child abuse charge.

I have paid an enormous price for those things and my children

KING: Because that's the one that got more attention than the alcohol.

POUNDSTONE: Of course it was. No, what got the most attention was the very mention of lewd conduct -- essentially, child molesting is what people got excited about. The press was, of course, less excited to talk about those charges being dropped than they were about them being raised.

But I don't -- I can't run screaming up and down the street that I'm innocent and I've been a victim because I'm not. But what -- if there's anything that's important to sort of America in all of this, it is the way that the process has worked. And...

KING: Do you think you got robbed?

POUNDSTONE: I think my kids are getting robbed. I think my kids are continually getting robbed. I don't entirely understand the motivation of everyone involved.

KING: What is the general law concerning alcoholism and children?

PFEIFFER: When you pose as a substantial risk of danger to your children, by clear and convincing evidence, those children are taken from you until -- and every six months the county has to prove -- they have the burden of proof that that danger exists or they have to give their children back.

KING: Natural child, adopted child, any child.

PFEIFFER: Any child.

KING: The children are everybody's children, right? That's the rules generally, the state. The child belongs to all of us. The child is in danger, the state can take a child away, right?

PFEIFFER: Yes.

KING: That's what I mean. The state has the power.

PFEIFFER: Right.

KING: We'll be right back with Paula Poundstone, Rich Pfeiffer and we'll include your phone calls later and hopefully Paula will have the children full time all the time December 11. We'll be right back.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: As part of the probation to sentence your client to 180 days in the county jail. Those days, however, can be served day per day in a drug rehab program. That's a court-ordered program that she has to stay and she has been staying one so far. And I give her credit for that.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Paula, how were you treated inside the jail today?

POUNDSTONE: Very well.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Were you given special treatment?

POUNDSTONE: I don't know. I've never been in there before. I have faith that the truth is the right thing.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: What do you have to say to your fans?

POUNDSTONE: Thank you.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: And there were a lot of fans, too. A lot of people supported you through all of this. A lot of friends stood up for you?

POUNDSTONE: Yes.

KING: We'll get to that in a while.

POUNDSTONE: I looked good there.

KING: Yes, you looked terrific. Boy, the men were flocking up to you.

POUNDSTONE: I'll tell you what. They have so little hair and makeup in the jail there in Santa Monica.

KING: Plead no contest to a misdemeanor count of injury to a child, inappropriate physical contact occurred. And also pled no contest to driving your child while drunk.

POUNDSTONE: Right.

KING: And you were sentenced to -- I want to get this right. You were given five years supervised probation plus community service, required to complete 180 days in a secure rehab facility.

POUNDSTONE: It was secure.

KING: You did no jail time.

POUNDSTONE: No, I did no jail time. Other than -- other than the couple of...

KING: When you were arrested. POUNDSTONE: When I was arrested. We had an agreement I -- it was my understanding that we had an agreement that I would come in if they wanted me to come in, I'd come in. And then they came to the rehab, this is my favorite part of the story. There were three cops and they climbed over the gate, which isn't unusual except the gate opens. So, It did seem like perhaps the wrong bust but --

KING: They told you to surrender but they came and got you anyway?

POUNDSTONE: Right.

KING: You were ordered to AA?

POUNDSTONE: Court ordered to AA three times a week which I've been doing ever since.

KING: I thought AA was voluntary?

POUNDSTONE: AA is not voluntary. Well, excuse me, the court can order you to it's 12-step self-help meetings. Well, I don't know any other. There is actually a -- I've heard of other ones, but they're not -- it is a little bit like separate but equal. They're not available in the same way. I couldn't do three a week with any other group because they don't meet that often.

KING: Did AA help?

POUNDSTONE: No. I don't --

KING: You have to be religious.

POUNDSTONE: You have to be religious too, yes. You to believe in a higher power. They read from the big book every day. That you have to believe that no human power could, you know, I don't know what it is they call it control your alcoholism, cure your alcoholism.

KING: What helped you to stop?

POUNDSTONE: I love my children and I will never, ever, ever put them through anything like this again or scare them. Without the state, having nothing to do with the state, I will never -- I don't ever want them to think for even a moment that something like this could happen again.

KING: Would you agree, Paul -- Rich, that the state had a right to take some action here?

PFEIFFER: They had to protect the children, and they knew the children had been in a car with Paula driving with them intoxicated and that put them at great risk.

POUNDSTONE: By the way, I agree with that without even turning to a lawyer. Although I'll pay him for that.

KING: So how were you able to stop just because of love for your children? You're not drinking because you love your children too much?

POUNDSTONE: That's right.

KING: If they grew up, you would drink again?

POUDSTONE: If they would grow up, I would don't drink again. I don't. Honestly, I don't...

KING: Your motivation is your children?

POUNDSTONE: My motivation is my children. I don't -- I don't look -- I don't set goals along those in that area much beyond that. But my motivation is my children.

KING: What did all this do to your career?

POUNDSTONE: I have no idea. I'm working. My show is --

KING: You're doing stand-up?

POUNDSTONE: I'm doing stand-up. My shows are a blast. They...

KING: Do you refer to the case?

POUNDSTONE: Yes.

KING: You do?

POUNDSTONE: Yes. My act is autobiographical. And, you know, it is my impressions of other things that you know, going on around the world, not just about myself but it is autobiographical. And therefore when I was 19 and I started, I talked about busing tables and taking public transportation. I'm 42 and I'm a -- you know, I'm a single mom and a felon and I talk about that. And it is actually kind of fun.

KING: You are a felon?

POUNDSTONE: I am a felon. You know, while I was in rehab -- a 30-day program but I was there for 180 days, I was there so long that my mail got rerouted. While I was in rehab, I got the summons for jury duty. had to check the little box are you a felon. It's the only perk to being a felon.

KING: No jury duty?

POUNDSTONE: No jury duty. Because I am a felon. It has been the only time I viewed it that way but --

KING: Didn't you get -- didn't one day you break -- didn't you --

POUNDSTONE: I went home on a visit one day. And I took three pills, two of which I had PRN, which means on request at the rehab that I was in. And one of which was previously prescribed, and I went to jail for that. KING: Because?

POUNDSTONE: The judge said so.

KING: Because the pills were what?

POUNDSTONE: One was anti- -- they were all three anti-anxiety pills.

KING: Why would she go to jail for an anti-anxiety pill.

PFEIFFER: It was an ambiguity that the court ordered her to take her psychiatric medication. She had different prescriptions, one from the rehab, one from her prior treatment right before that, and it got cleared up right away. This was all before I was on the case. I'm not really qualified to talk about the details of that. But...

POUNDSTONE: Well, that's what I think they sort of made it out that it was a bigger thing that it was.

KING: Where are those sexual abuse things, did that come out of middle air, did that come out of some fantasy dream



of some prosecutor or -- that's what hit you the hardest.

POUNDSTONE: Of course.

KING: Everybody was talking about Paula Poundstone, sexually abusing her children. Not the Paula Poundstone drinks, drink was secondary.

POUNDSTONE: OK, the answer...

KING: That was the story. Where would that come from?

POUNDSTONE: The answer is no. The reason we know the answer is no, the reason why I can speak about it here that the answer is no, is because those charges were dropped. And like Rich said, let me tell you something, I have no friends in the courthouse. If they could have proved it -- they would have proved it.

KING: If somebody charged me with driving a bicycle in the wrong lane upside down on Sunset Boulevard, I would laugh. And the first thing I would say is where did that charge come from because I didn't.

POUNDSTONE: I'm not allowed to you the genesis of the charges.

PFEIFFER: But wouldn't you love to be able to talk about that charge if you were charged with it?

KING: I would look.

PFEIFFER: What if there was a gag order and you could go to jail if you talk about it.

KING: On something that has been dropped? Why is there a gag order on something... PFEIFFER: There's a lot of competing interests here. Although the criminal courts says one of those competing interests is to protect Paula. I don't believe that for a second. This judge does not -- is not a fan of Paula Poundstone.

KING: Gotcha.

PFEIFFER: But there are children involved in this case and that is the reason why the appellate court had issued their gag order...

KING: That gag order is until December 11?

PFEIFFER: No, that gag order's going to probably stay on forever to protect those children.

KING: We'll be back with more Paula Poundstone and Rich Pfeiffer. We'll be taking your phone calls. December 11 could be the big day and that's only a week away. We'll be right back.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

POUNDSTONE: All I really care about is getting my children back and that's where they belong and as soon as their in my -- back in my house where they belong, you know, then everyone else can just muddle through their day without me.

QUESTION: What are we going to do without you, Paula?

POUNDSTONE: I don't know, it's going to a sad day in the media (UNINTELLIGIBLE). But my kids belong back at home and that all I care about and making things up to them. Correcting that mistakes that I made. That's all I care about.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We have received a phenomenal amount of support from people around this community, around the country and indeed around the world. People who know and love Paula. And have stood by her at this time of need. Paula has asked me to convey her heart felt thanks to all those who stood by her and support her. Thank you very much.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: We know Paula that was not Rich Pfeiffer, did you change lawyers?

POUNDSTONE: I did change lawyers.

KING: Because?

POUNDSTONE: Because I didn't think the earlier guys were doing a good job.

KING: Now give me a scenario here. You were tossed -- you were a family court and criminal court?

POUNDSTONE: Yes. Apparently there is a statute in California law that says the family court presides over issues of the family and we've had two courts, the criminal court making orders about reunification of visitation or restricting visitation.

We originally had -- we originally had a family court judge who specifically -- she wasn't a judge, she was a referee, who specifically said that she would do nothing until the criminal court changed their orders.

And then I found out from my attorney at the time that she was in line to become a real judge and that criminal court judge sat on the panel to make that determination. I don't have validation on that but that's what I was told at the time.

KING: You were a bouncing ball then?

POUNDSTONE: Yes, it felt -- I don't know for sure, but it felt like they tried to run the clock.

KING: How did you discuss this with your children?

POUNDSTONE: I've been as up-front and honest. There is a gag order -- I'm not allowed to really talk to the kids about it and it gets harder and harder.

KING: You can't talk to your children?

POUNDSTONE: No. I've been able to apologize to my children. I've been able to -- you know, listen, my kids -- my kids see me doing my job. You know? I don't -- you know, years from now they may need more explanation than that, I'm sure.

KING: They knew you were drinking, right?

POUNDSTONE: Yes, they knew I was drinking. But what they see right now is -- is me taking care of them and really working hard at going through all the hoops that I need to go through in order to make sure I can take care of them. That's what they see.

KING: What do you still have to do? Do you still have to go for aid now?

POUNDSTONE: I have to go to my three AA meetings a week.

KING: Even though you don't believe in them.

POUNDSTONE: Has nothing to do with whether or not I believe in them. But I go to three AA meetings a week. I go to a psychiatrist and a psychologist. I've been court ordered to 12 different therapists in 18 months.

KING: For how long?

POUNDSTONE: There is no time frame on those things. There is no end to that unless I'm in -- well, I'm on probation for another three and a half years, I have to do random drug and alcohol testing which needless to say has been clean...

(CROSSTALK)

KING: On December 11, (UNINTELLIGIBLE) we expect if he follows the recommendations of the people who -- who is...

POUNDSTONE: The social workers.

KING: The social workers, 99 percent they do, right?

PFEIFFER: Right.

KING: If he follows that, her children will be back in her custody, full time.

PFEIFFER: Yes.

KING: Right? And they won't be -- she won't be required to -- or will she?

POUNDSTONE: There is still an issue.

PFEIFFER: The case will be open for at least another six months to monitor the progress of the children and Paula's progress.

KING: Will the children be called in and interviewed? Will they...

POUNDSTONE: No the social worker comes to the house. There is still an issue which is that the criminal court where the children have no representation, they don't have a lawyer in criminal court, the criminal court has made rulings about restricting visitation.

The criminal court can still at any time change that. And so although I have every intention of assuring my children that, you know, they are to stay there, because I don't anticipate that, but the point is that can happen at any time.

KING: A break and come back and start to include your phone calls. Don't go away.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

POUNDSTONE: These are seat fillers and how that works is when a star gets up to use the bathroom, accept an award or present an award, they have people who actually are paid to sit in their chair until they return. And who are you sitting for?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: John Larroquette.

POUNDSTONE: And have you -- did you talk to him. He is a nice guy?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Yes, he's a real nice guy.

POUNDSTONE: When did you get to talk to him because I thought you sat for him.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: He came back and said get out of my seat.

POUNDSTONE: He came back and said get out of -- you're a guy on the street who somebody dragged in and said sit there and you sit there and some John Larroquette jerk comes in and says get out of my seat.

Come here just a minute. Would you just come here a minute. You know what? Is John Larroquette in here right now? I think maybe we have a little lesson in manners right now.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

POUNDSTONE: I'm kind of suicidal. I tried carbon monoxide once. Wasn't really working because my building has a big underground parking garage. It was taking a really long time. I had to bring a stack of book and some snacks. People would come by and tap on the window, How is that suicide coming? Pretty good, thanks. I felt drowsy earlier today.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: That was the heyday of Paula Poundstone.

POUNDSTONE: Excuse me.

KING: That was when you were at the top of the game.

POUNDSTONE: Hey, hey, hey, hey, the game is not over. The heyday of Paula Poundstone. I have yet to begun -- begin.

KING: You were spritely. You were not in trouble.

POUNDSTONE: No, I wasn't in trouble.

KING: Which leads to the question, how have you held up?

POUNDSTONE: I always loved my children. I am now devoted to my children. And that's all I care about anymore. I mean, the rest of you, I wish you luck. I enjoy my work a lot. I'm lucky that I have a really great, fun job. But I'm going to make up to my kids for -- as best I can for the mistakes that I've made and I really want them to see that when you make a mistake, you admit what you did, you don't admit what you didn't do and you just keep marching.

KING: You came from a rough upbringing, didn't you? POUNDSTONE: Not really, no. I came from an upper middle class house in Massachusetts. For some odd reason it is characterized as some big difficult -- you know, I'll tell you -- because I've been court ordered to go 12 shrinks in the last 18 months, I'm so sick of my own story that I've just started making stuff up in front of those people. I really think that all of that has so little to do with it. Just...

KING: Houston, Texas.

POUNDSTONE: ...move on

KING: Houston for Paula Poundstone. Her attorney is Rich Pfeiffer. Hello.

CALLER: Hello. I wanted to know how drunk were you when you were driving your children?

POUNDSTONE: I didn't do a breathalyzer test, ma'am, I don't know.

KING: I guess behind that is were you very drunk? Were you incoherent? What are your memories of that? Does that -- you have to be in that -- we're trying to understand the alcoholic -- alcoholism. We're learning a lot more about it all the time.

POUNDSTONE: It was a mistake. It was not a good thing. It was a bad thing. I'm sorry as can be and would never do it again and now we move on.

KING: Scarborough, Ontario, hello.

CALLER: Hello, Miss Poundstone?

POUNDSTONE: Yes.

CALLER: I have a brief couple of questions for you.

Firstly, Miss Poundstone, whatever got you to drink to the point where there was a battle of the bottle? And secondly, what do you believe mentally caused you to endanger children?

POUNDSTONE: What mentally caused me to endanger children? I drank too much and my judgment was severely impaired.

KING: Do you know why you drank too much?

POUNDSTONE: I don't think there has to be a great reason, no. I find that a really funny question when people ask that, you know?

KING: It's asked by people who are not -- we always -- why do people --.

POUNDSTONE: I don't have the answer to that question. All I know is that I did. And that's all I need to know. I don't feel like I need to know some big, you know, you know, bleeding heart reason for why I did this or why I did that. All I need to know is I don't do that anymore.

KING: Do you have a desire to do it?

POUNDSTONE: No. Have I ever -- I'm aware that alcohol exists, but, no. I don't have a desire to do that.

KING: Chester, New Jersey, hello. Hello? Chester, New Jersey, are you there?

They told me...

POUNDSTONE: That's not the first time Chester, New Jersey, hung up on me.

KING: Las Vegas, Nevada, hello.

CALLER: Hello. I'm calling to ask you if -- do you feel -- hello, I'm calling to ask...

KING: Yes, go ahead.

CALLER: Are you fearful of your children growing up and having essentially a mommy dearest complex?

POUNDSTONE: No. No. I -- you know, I feel good that my kids are seeing -- you know, are seeing how much I love them by how hard I'm working to make things right. And my kids are going to have their own problems and, you know what, if I did it perfectly, which I couldn't have, they still would have. So I -- you know, no, I'm not fearful of anything about my children growing up.

KING: Have they been well treated in their foster home?

POUNDSTONE: Absolutely, yes, they have.

KING: Boston, Massachusetts, hello.

CALLER: Hello, Paula?

KING: All right, go ahead.

POUNDSTONE: Yes.

CALLER: Oh, hi. My mom was a single mother for 30 years. Kudos to you for loving your kids. I would like to know what do you find to have been your greatest joys, what are the greatest challenges and you made a great

(UNINTELLIGIBLE).-

POUNDSTONE: I don't know, just the simple stuff. We went to the grocery store the other day and really, until Thomas putted the cart into the sunglasses rack, we had a fabulous time. I mean, I love every minute being with them. There is nothing that I want to do more than that. As much as I love being on stage, there is nothing I want to do more than that.

KING: Have you handled other cases similar to Paula's? PFEIFFER: I do this kind of work a lot, yes.

KING: Is there a lot -- are a lot of children removed from homes?

PFEIFFER: It is surprising how many.

KING: Is that a daily occurrence in Los Angeles?

PFEIFFER: Yes. Multiple times in a day.

KING: Really?

PFEIFFER: Yes. An appellate court justice in Orange County talked about -- how surprised he was with the volume of cases in child dependency court and he said that approximately 25 percent of the appellate court cases in Orange County are child abuse cases and most of those are where parental rights have been terminated and parents are fighting to get them back.

KING: Is hers one of the worst in the treatment she's gotten?

PFEIFFER: Hers is one of the very rare quick recoveries to where there is no relapse and the parent has done everything to get their child back.

KING: Most cases there's relapse.

PFEIFFER: There's -- almost always there's a relapse.

KING: I mean, the parent drinks again...

PFEIFFER: Right.

KING: ... or takes drugs again.

PFEIFFER: Right. And alcohol and drugs is the very big major problem underlying all of the child abuse. You know, you might spank your children, hit them too hard or do some other things to hurt them, but a lot of times even then it's alcohol or drug use.

KING: Is it sometimes two parents, a mother and a father?

PFEIFFER: Then, yes. There's domestic violence cases as well.

KING: Where the kids will be taken because of that?

PFEIFFER: Right.

KING: Removed for their own safety and...

PFEIFFER: Yes, and then they give the parents a choice: leave your husband or leave your children.

KING: We'll be right back with more. Don't go away.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

POUNDSTONE: I wish I had a degenerative disease. And I'm sure I'll rot in hell for saying that and I don't care. I'll tell you why, because I'm tired and achy all the time anyways. I know I'm not going to feel any worse and the exact same behavior I have now would be considered courageous. I would roll out of bed about noon and somebody in the other room would whisper, She insisted on getting up.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

POUNDSTONE: I was here the other day for rehearsal and I swear to you there was a camera -- there it is. There is a camera right down there. This is the saddest job of the night, is it not? They put some poor little guy in there in case the president holds hands with his wife. He has to shoot it. And don't you all feel a certain amount of pressure as a result?

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: What was it like working for the president?

POUNDSTONE: It was a blast. That was me in my heyday again, wasn't it?

KING: Heyday means when you're on top of the world, and then you got knocked down. You got to come back up again.

POUNDSTONE: I'm not sure I was on top of the world but it was fun.

KING: Charlotte, North Carolina, hello.

CALLER: Hi. Hi, Paula.

POUNDSTONE: Hey, how are you doing?

CALLER: I'm good. I was wondering if you found that you got a lot of cards and letters in support from your fans and I wanted to also thank you for the note that you sent me back.

POUNDSTONE: You're welcome, I did. I'm now answering mail from a year and a half ago. At the time I put it all in a box because it was too hard to deal with and carried it with me and assumed it was positive. So if you're one of the person that wrote to me, I'm glad I wrote you back.

KING: Didn't a lot of people come to court for you, friends?

POUNDSTONE: Yes. Yes, we -- I have a lot to be grateful for. We've had a tremendous amount of support.

KING: Look at that. Look at that, we're showing a picture now, we love you, Paula.

POUNDSTONE: Those girls put signs up all over our front yard and it was very nice.

KING: What happens on -- before we take the next call. Rich what happens on the 11th. Give me the...

PFEIFFER: On the 11th, we go for what is called an 18-month review hearing.

KING: Before the judge?

PFEIFFER: Before the judge.

KING: Are the children there?

PFEIFFER: The children are not there. But they're represented by an attorney who will be there.

POUNDSTONE: That's in the family court, not the criminal court.

PFEIFFER: Right.

KING: And the judge then what, questions you, questions her...

PFEIFFER: Well, the social worker writes a report and pretty much assesses the progress that Paula made in the case. And gets reports from the therapists. And they -- the alcohol testing people, and any of the other requirements you're supposed to do in a case plan. And they talk to the children and they get their feelings.

KING: That's told to the judge, the children are not there.

PFEIFFER: Well these are all -- No, these are all done in a report.

KING: That a judge reads.

PFEIFFER: The report comes in, we all read it. And we agree with it, sign off on the recommendation or we contest it.

KING: How do you already know the recommendation?

PFEIFFER: Because I was told by the attorney for the county that the social workers...

POUNDSTONE: The social worker made the recommendation.

PFEIFFER: It's going to be a popular recommendation.

KING: Do you expect a long hearing?

PFEIFFER: No. I expect everybody to read the reports and sign off on them and get out of there.

KING: And if they say, okay, they're yours, what then? Does she go right then go and get them where ever they're at and that's it?

PFEIFFER: She's got that now. She's got unmonitored contact now. She's got them every day throughout the whole day.

(CROSSTALK)

KING: I mean gone, gone. They go home. They go sleep with her. They...

PFEIFFER: They're doing that now.

KING: Then what is the big deal then?

POUNDSTONE: No, we had some overnights. Currently they're -- no, tonight when I finish taking care of them, I'll bring them back to the foster home and go get them again in the morning. In fact, we were in there at 16 days out from the 11th, whatever that is, and they still wouldn't agree to return them. They still, you know, wanted to do like some overnights or whatever. And what 16 days meant to these people, I don't know.

KING: This will be the total return.

PFEIFFER: It will be a legal return, and the difference between that is for them to take the children away in a dependency court, they would have to go through legal obstacles to do that. They couldn't at their whim come and take the kids.

KING: The Bronx, New York, hello.

CALLER: Hi, Paula.



POUNDSTONE: How you doing?

CALLER: I'm well, how are you?

POUNDSTONE: I'm all right.

CALLER: I followed your career for a while. You're a very high profile, highly successful single female. And in a man's profession.

POUNDSTONE: Honestly, I've only been high profile since I was a felon.

CALLER: Since your heyday.

POUNDSTONE: I wish I had that much press over my good shows.

CALLER: Well, but in any event, you were doing well. In a man's world. And you don't always have exactly conservative views. That comes through in your shows. I've seen them. I'm wondering if you think that made you a political target basically...

KING: Because she's liberal politically? You think so?

POUNDSTONE: I don't know. As I said earlier, I don't understand totally the motivation for -- not for the initially, you know, I made mistakes and the kids did need to be protected. I believe that. But the way that it has been handled since then, I can't understand the motivation. I really don't. I believe firmly that it has not been in my kids' best interests for a long, long time now.

KING: What do you think the motivation is -- Rich.

PFEIFFER: The motivation is the children.

KING: On why...

PFEIFFER: On the state, they're afraid of what is going to happen with Paula as being this big celebrity. The normal person doesn't go through this. The normal person...

KING: What are they afraid of? She's a celebrity, so finish the last sentence.

PFEIFFER: If she relapses, why did you give the children back, they'll be in the limelight. Everybody will know she relapsed.

KING: John Smith got his children back last week and he fell off the wagon or whatever and that's not -- that's not in the "L.A. Times." Paula Poundstone would be.

PFEIFFER: That's my only guess.

KING: That puts an onus on her, doesn't it? Tougher on her?

PFEIFFER: Makes it tougher on her kids. The one thing that has been in her favor is she has so much contact with her kids where they've been in care where the average family gets one or two hours a week.

KING: How did she get that break?

PFEIFFER: She got lucky and got a neighbor to be a foster mom for her kids that kept the kids together in one home so they wouldn't be separated and allowed visitation to happen.

KING: Drums, Pennsylvania. Hello.

CALLER: Hello, I'm a fan of Paula's and I wish her well. I just have one question. Since she doesn't believe in the

religious part of AA, what kind of religious training are her children going to get?

POUNDSTONE: My children -- my children are going to understand the truth about things. My children are going to believe in other people, I hope. My children are going to be taught that you know, doing the right thing is the right thing to do. My children are going to be taught when you make a mistake, you admit it and try to correct it and make up for it. And my children are going to be taught to believe in each other and, gee, if I can do all that, I'm a genius.

KING: What is it like for you at an AA meeting then? Do you get up and talk, participate? POUNDSTONE: I do not. I listen to everything that gets said, I appreciate hearing -- you know, I appreciate the sincerity. A lot of testimonials. I appreciate the sincerity with which other people share. I have met people that, you know whose experience I probably have gotten some value from. But a lot of it, honestly, I ignore.

KING: The religious part?

POUNDSTONE: The religious part.

KING: They do that at every meeting?

POUNDSTONE: It is interesting she said what kind of religious training are my kids going to get. Because my children were put in foster care with people they didn't know, and a couple of weeks later they moved them to somebody I did know. Within the first period, my daughter was taken to church like I don't know how many times but she told me about it and I was appalled. Because they need to honor the -- whatever the religion is. If she were Jewish and they did that, people would be up in arms. They need to honor our religious viewpoint as well as you would anybody else's and that hasn't been done.

KING: Long Island, New York, hello. Long Island, hello. Wrong line. We'll take a break and be back with our remaining moments and phone calls. Don't go away.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

POUNDSTONE: I used to live in San Francisco. When I first moved here it was foggy and rainy and cold for two months. I thought terrific, it is sort of romantic. I'll break up an old chair for kindling, buy a bottle of wine and sit in front of the fire for a day. Two months a hopeless alcoholic with no furniture.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JAY LENO, HOST, "THE TONIGHT SHOW": Comedian Paula Poundstone, our tonight show correspondent at the Democratic convention. I have no idea what she has in store for us -- Paula.

POUNDSTONE: Hey, Jay, how are you doing?

LENO: Looks like -- oh, you're up on the podium.

POUNDSTONE: Yes, we got permission to come up on the podium but they made a big speech to us, the security guys, about how I have to remain at least six inches from the podium area...

LENO: Now why is that?

POUNDSTONE: I have no idea. Here is a -- would you come here a second, the security guy.

He refuses to come over. Jay, think -- hold on, I think I know how to get him to come, if I just go near the podium...

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: Funny stuff. Did you...

POUNDSTONE: The beginning of my life of crime right there is what that is.

KING: Jay Leno was important if your career, wasn't he?

POUNDSTONE: He gave me a great opportunity to cover the conventions and the inauguration back the Clinton day, back in my heyday. And really, really fun to do. I was allowed to just go off the cuff which is, as you probably know, virtually unheard of in television.

KING: Where are you working next?

POUNDSTONE: I'm working at the Sunset Casino in Las Vegas Friday night.

KING: For the weekend or just Friday night.

POUNDSTONE: Just Friday night.

KING: Santa Ana, California, hello.

CALLER: Hi.

POUNDSTONE: Hey, how you doing?

CALLER: I'm good. How are you?

POUNDSTONE: Good.

CALLER: Paula, I was wondering if you're going to become an activist for patient parents facing the same challenge that you did?

POUNDSTONE: I had the great pleasure of being helped by a really terrific attorney who works with a lot of families that are having some of the problems that we have had and seemed to understand the law which, by the way, you don't as a criminal.

I didn't learn about law before I became a criminal. He seems to understand the law better than anybody that I've dealt with. And I will at Rich's beck and call do whatever I could for anybody who works with him herein.

There are a lot of people. I'm lucky in a lot of ways that I was able to get the help I was able to get. But there are a lot of people who have Herculean battles with the courts that are unfair and not in the best interests of their kids or families.

KING: Could she be helpful?

PFEIFFER: She could. This caller sounds like somebody I know who facilitates a group of activists in Santa Ana that I've met with and worked with.

KING: Can Paula be a cog in this wheel?

PFEIFFER: Absolutely. Paula knows how the system is and how unfair it is. If the public knew how unfair the system was, it wouldn't remain that way.

KING: What is the most unfair thing about it? If you could change one thing right now by edict.

PFEIFFER: Keeping the children's court under secrecy and that way the public doesn't see what is going on and the unfairness can continue.

KING: They defend that by saying you don't want to print the child's name, right?

PFEIFFER: Right. They could go to children's initials in all the reports and not have children on any of the

photographs or TV or anything.

KING: There are ways to do it.

PFEIFFER: There are.

KING: Tacoma, Washington, hello.

CALLER: Hi, Larry. Hi, Paula.

POUNDSTONE: How are you doing?

CALLER: Just fine. I was wondering if the more therapy your children had, would they come home quicker to you? And does it make it any difference about the foster parent being right next door to you?

POUNDSTONE: They're not -- they're actually not right next door to me but they are friends and they're not all that far away.

And has it made a difference, yes, it has made a tremendous difference. That was a kind thing that that friend did. She got certified to be a foster parent and has been really, really helpful.

The best thing that has happened and it would be great if this could happen for other families in the same situation by the way, the thing that my kids need more than anything in the world is me. And that may upset the DA, that may upset the social workers, that may upset the powers that be, but the thing that my children need more than anything in this entire world is me. If you ask my kids, they would tell you that.

KING: A minute left, one more call. Sunnyville, California, hello.

CALLER: Hi, Paula. How are you?

POUNDSTONE; Good.

CALLER: I have a quick comment and a quick question. I've been sober for ten years, had small children and know the guilt and how that can eat you up so hang in there.

POUNDSTONE: Thank you.

CALLER: I had the same reservations about AA as far as there being a God, but the higher power can be the beach, it can be anything. And you say you love your children and that...

POUNDSTONE: I think people in Nebraska are going to be offended by that.

CALLER: You say you love your children and that will keep you sober. I say to you if you love your children, then really give AA a chance because it saved a lot of lives.

KING: Sorry we're out of time but that's not going to work for you right?

POUNDSTONE: I don't have the choice of whether or not to give AA a chance. Sort of a moot point.

KING: Paula Poundstone and Rich Pfeiffer, thank you so much.

POUNDSTONE: Thank you.

KING: Best of luck.

PFEIFFER: Thank you.

KING: She'll be at the Sunset Casino in Las Vegas on Friday night. Paula Poundstone. Good to have her with us.