Steve Chanley: We are joined today by Will Thompson, who is currently the Dean of Students at the Appalachian School of Law, where he also holds the position of visiting professor. He is a former circuit court judge in West Virginia and a former United States attorney in charge of the Southern District of West Virginia. On top of that, he currently still practices law as Of Counsel with a law firm. Thanks for joining us today, Will.

Will Thompson: Thanks for having me on.

Steve Chanley: How long have you been practicing law?

Will Thompson: This year marks the 30th year.

Steve Chanley: Are you from West Virginia originally?

Will Thompson: I am. I am a ninth generation West Virginian. My forefathers and foregrandmothers were here before West Virginia became a state.

Steve Chanley: Wow, that's impressive.

Will Thompson: And they were all named William Thompson. I'm like the eighth William Thompson in a row and my son is the ninth.

Steve Chanley: Well, that must be confusing during family gatherings.

Will Thompson: We all have different middle initials, so that helps.

Steve Chanley: I studied your background a bit, which has included just about every role that an attorney can have. But I'd really like to begin with your current academic role. Is this your first foray into being a legal educator?

Will Thompson: It's my first foray into being one full time. I have spoken at law schools in the past more as a guest lecturer coming in for a one or two-hour event, but this is my first time making it a full-time position.

Steve Chanley: What drew you to becoming a law professor after having been a judge and a high-level federal prosecutor?

Will Thompson: I was searching after leaving my role as U.S. Attorney for what to do next. I wanted to do something that did involve some type of public service because that's basically what I've done for the last 20 plus years. And I wanted to do something that was exciting. I come from a family of educators. Going back to my grandmother, they had all taught in the local school system. I'm the only member of my immediate family that never drew a paycheck from our local school system. So, education was naturally a next step for me. I like working with young people. I like working with young lawyers. So I thought this would be a great opportunity to try.

Steve Chanley: When does the next school year begin?

Will Thompson: We have orientation on August the 4th. Appalachian does orientation a little bit different than a lot of law schools. We have the 1L students come down for two weeks before the school starts, basically give them a boot camp of law school. We're going to teach them how to brief a case, how to read a case. One thing I like about it and appreciate about the school is we actually start bar prep during the orientation. They'll take a mini bar just to give them an idea of where they stand. So we start orientation there and then the actual school begins two weeks later.

Steve Chanley: Well, I can tell you, I could have certainly benefited from a program like that.

Will Thompson: I remember before I started law school, there was not a lot of material. This was, of course, mostly pre-internet days. So I remember I read, I'm sure most law students did in that day, *1L* by Scott Turrow. There were some other books I remember getting, but there's not a lot of information of what to expect your first day. I like the fact that we're actually giving students: this is what we expect of you. This is how you read a case. This is how you brief a case. Sort of gives them a leg up so when they actually do start the classes, they can pay attention to material rather than trying to figure out how to process the material.

Steve Chanley: Which courses will you be teaching?

Will Thompson: The first semester I'm teaching appellate advocacy. Second semester I'm going to teach criminal law and my daughter is actually a student there so I'm also going to teach constitutional law but she takes it this year so I'm going to stand on the sidelines while she takes it.

Steve Chanley: Well, that must be interesting having your daughter there.

Will Thompson: It is. She is the one who actually made me aware of the position being open. She told me that the constitutional law professor was retiring. She knows I have a keen interest in constitutional law. And she said, “You ought to talk to the dean,” who I had met previously, “about coming down here and teaching.” And I went down there and talked to him and he said, “Well, I've got a different role for you. Why don’t you come down here and be dean of students?” And he talked me into it. And I'm going to Appalachian School of Law this fall.

Steve Chanley: How do you prepare for teaching at law school for the first time? Do you have a specific methodology?

Will Thompson: One thing that helped was the other faculty at the law school has been very welcoming of me. They shared their course outlines with me. The person who taught appellate advocacy—I'm teaching the criminal section of appellate advocacy—shared all his classroom slides with me from last year. So that's helped. I've talked to

many different faculty and I plan on talking to many more. Now I am going to be doing this sort of a trial by fire. I feel pretty comfortable teaching appellate advocacy because especially in my role as a judge, I didn't really sit as an appellate judge that much, but I did on occasion. I was used to reading briefs and making decisions, so I think I have a lot to add for that class. But I'm probably going to be learning just as much as a student, especially my first time through.

Steve Chanley: In what ways do you think that law students today might be different from law students of a generation ago?

Will Thompson: One thing I'm concerned about—and I speak this as a father of four children—is attention span. I think the internet's brought a lot of great things into our lives. It's also brought a lot of bad things. And I think our attention span, our ability to read long passages, has suffered because of the social media generation. So I think that's going to be a significant difference. I think I'm going to have to teach the class in two to three-minute blurbs and then have discussions, as opposed to a 45-minute lecture and then a discussion.

Steve Chanley: Are you going to adapt your teaching methods to enhance reaching your students?

Will Thompson: I have thought along those lines, and like I said, it's going to be a working process. But I think: keep it short, keep it engaged. One of the things I really liked about law school, even back in the Stone Age when I went, was the engagement you had with professors. Even if you were not the person on the hot seat, you felt for the person on the hot seat. And it really was a discussion as opposed to someone just sitting up there telling you a bunch of legal doctrines and theories and you taking notes and then regurgitating it on a test. I liked the fact that through the Socratic method, there was always some type of engagement and I think that might actually serve this generation of law students pretty well.

Steve Chanley: Socratic method as a pedagogical tool is misused in the wrong hands I've found. I can speak only from my personal experience at law school. I was terrified when I was asked something by the professor and it wasn't used necessarily as a means of promoting a dialogue so much as a means of humiliating me as a student. That was my thinking.

Will Thompson: I remember my first two weeks of law school asking myself, why am I putting myself through this? My undergraduate degree was in civil engineering. I'd actually worked as a civil engineer for the summer between undergrad and law school. And I'm like, you know, I could have stayed there and probably made as much money as I'm going to make as a first-year law grad. But here I am, I want to deal with professors who are going to humiliate you on a daily basis. Now you've developed a

tougher skin. And then you realize some of the professors were doing that as a way to better prepare you. I remember the professor I was probably most intimidated by my first two weeks was the professor I ended up enjoying the most and took him for every class he had.

Steve Chanley: What advice would you give to a young person today who's thinking about going to law school?

Will Thompson: My advice, I've given this advice to a lot of people over the years. A lot of people have come to me and asked, “Should I go to law school? What should I do?” The first is undergraduate major. Mine was atypical. For some reason, I went the civil engineering route, mainly because my father told me, “I don't want you to get a business degree or a history degree because all you'll be qualified to do after that is sell refrigerators at Sears. So you need to do a degree that you're going to actually have a job at.” I knew I was going to law school at the time. I wish I would have majored in something like philosophy or something of that nature because I think it would have helped me better prepare the logic behind it. I would encourage people who are thinking about law school to do something with their undergraduate degree that will help them prepare, whether it be English—it obviously helps with your writing. I loved the philosophy classes I took in undergrad. I wish I would have taken more of those. I think that would have helped me better prepare for law school. Political science, I know that's a traditional route. I think that is a good preparation for law school. You just better be prepared to go to law school if you do major in it.

Steve Chanley: Would you have given the same advice, say 20 years ago?

Will Thompson: I think so. I have given the same advice 20 years ago. I used to stress to people they should take philosophy because I think that was the best undergraduate major. I took two philosophy classes as an undergrad and I wish I had taken four or six more. I would have given the same advice. I would also tell them make sure this is a profession that you enjoy, a job that you will like. Because if you don't like it, it's a miserable existence. The school is tough, the school's not easy. I would equate the school—I've called it many times, especially your first year—as a mental boot camp. You need to be prepared for it. But if you are prepared for it and it's something you want to do, it's certainly been a very rewarding career for myself.

Steve Chanley: Do you believe that the practice of law is currently much different than it was 20 years ago?

Will Thompson: It's incredibly different than it was 20 years ago. And I think it's going to be incredibly different five years from now, 10 years from now. You're seeing the advent of technology, the advent of artificial intelligence. If used in the right hands and used properly, it's going to make lawyers much more effective. It's going to make their

work product much better. Now, if you try to use it to create shortcuts, you're going to create a lot of problems for yourself. I saw a few times as a judge where people would get sloppy—not so much with artificial intelligence, but with some of their technology. They weren't prepared and they expected the technology to be perfect. But I do think the practice of law is ever-changing. And that's one of the reasons I wanted to go into the academic world, because I sort of want to be one of the leaders of that change. Prepare the next generation of lawyers for what I did, which is certainly much different than what people did who graduated in the 1960s and 70s. And your career is going to be much different than mine, but you need to go into it with an open mind—one who's adapted to change. And I think it's going to continue to be an exciting profession and career.

Steve Chanley: Does your law school provide any technical support or have classes specifically on the new emerging technologies?

Will Thompson: We do. The actual dean of the school comes from the military. His name is David Westron. He did a lot with writing some policies with respect to outer space law. So we are pretty adaptive. We do have some courses where we incorporate artificial intelligence into them, how to use them. Actually, with my appellate advocacy class, I am not allowing the use of artificial intelligence—at least for the writing of the first brief—because I want to make sure they can put words on paper themselves and not type a prompt into a computer. But we are recognizing that the legal profession is changing and we're trying to be on the forefront.

Steve Chanley: Do you think most law schools today place enough emphasis on practical aspects of practicing law, such as running a practice, bringing in clients, and working with clients?

Will Thompson: I don't. That's one of the reasons I was sort of drawn to my current spot at Appalachian School of Law. I hired several graduates from there, both as a judge and as a U.S. attorney for clerks and AUSA positions. And they have always put an emphasis on making practice-ready lawyers. I have seen a lot of lawyers graduate from law school who are not practice-ready, who might understand the law incredibly well, but did not know how to put that information to use in a practice—building a law practice, how to argue in front of a judge, how to relate to a client. And that is something I think a lot of law schools could do a better job with than what they're currently doing.

Steve Chanley: Do you know whether the ABA mandates any type of practical curriculum in order to be accredited?

Will Thompson: They are and they're actually increasing the amount of—well, they're basing it on hours in school—but the percentage of your education. I think they're going to up it to 12 hours. And I might be wrong on that, but they are increasing. They're

realizing there's a need to increase practice-ready lawyers and the ABA is doing—I don't know if it takes effect this year or in a couple of years—but they are addressing that issue, which I think is a great thing.

Steve Chanley: One of the things that you'll be doing at Appalachian Law School is establishing a mentorship program for students being paired with alumni and other practitioners. Can you tell us about that?

Will Thompson: What we're doing is essentially making sure the lawyers have someone to call. The phone-a-friend—or I guess now it's more of a text-a-friend. But people they can relate to, they can ask questions. I think mentors are very important in the development of a practicing lawyer. As a U.S. attorney, we had a very strong mentorship program. And we did it in such a way where they were not necessarily—or they couldn't be—the supervisor of the attorney, because we wanted the person to be able to go to them and ask what they might think was a silly question or something of that nature, or a question they don't want to admit they don't know the answer to. So that's part of the reason we're doing the mentorship. And also, the practice of law is tough. We want them to have someone they can rely on when they've got an issue or they've got a question. And it could be something totally unrelated to the law. I've been doing this long enough that I've seen lawyers develop dependency problems, things of that nature. We want them to have a mentor to, number one, hopefully prevent that from happening. And number two, if it does happen, someone they can turn to and ask for help.

Steve Chanley: Are more law schools attempting to be more proactive in establishing or promoting mentorships for their students and graduates?

Will Thompson: It's my understanding that is a current trend among law schools.

Steve Chanley: I applaud that. How hard is it to get practicing attorneys to agree to be mentors to law students or recent graduates?

Will Thompson: It depends on who's asking and who's being asked. Some people love it. Some people will jump at the chance to do it. And those, of course, are the people we're asking. Sometimes they bear the burden because not everybody wants to help people. Not everybody wants the middle-of-the-afternoon phone call: “How do I file this brief?” or “What does this judge do if I miss a deadline?” But a lot of people embrace it. It's pretty—how can I say—special. Everybody I have called thus far, and like I said, I know a lot of the people in the area, of asking them to come and help, they've all jumped at the chance. I think lawyers as a whole take a leadership role within society, and they like to be able to teach and help other people in the profession. And that's not true of everyone, but there's a large percentage of us who do.

Steve Chanley: Have mentors played a role in your own development?

Will Thompson: I was very, very fortunate. When I graduated law school, I was able to go back to my hometown to practice at a small—it was a father and son firm. And the father had sat on the circuit court bench for about 12 years. And I did everything he didn't want to do. And he was a great mentor. Basically I had the ability to ask a former judge, “Can I do this or should I do this?” His name was Jerry Cook. He's still with us, which is great. He was a great mentor, pointing me in the right direction, but also gave me enough rope to learn. I mean, he didn't micromanage me by any stretch of the imagination, turned me loose, but was always there to answer the questions I had. And that's the type of mentor I would like to see everyone have.

Steve Chanley: Let's talk a little bit about your current private practice. You remain as an of-counsel attorney at a law firm in addition to your role as a law professor and a dean of students. Can you tell us about that?

Will Thompson: Yes, I'm counsel to Spillman Thomas and Battle. It's a rather large firm for West Virginia. It's headquartered in West Virginia, but it has locations in Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida. We have one office in Florida. And my role there is what I would call a problem-solving role. I'm going to use some of my background in ADR, doing mediation, some arbitrations, but also to do problem solving—to disentangle people from certain issues they might have. I do have pretty extensive experience in a wide variety of areas of the law, whether it be government relations, practicing before an administrative agency, a litigation question, or what a particular judge likes to do or not do. I'm sort of the go-to person for questions such as that.

Steve Chanley: I like the concept of how that could dovetail very nicely with your role as a legal educator—being very practical in solving problems and possibly even explaining to attorneys, students in your class, how they will ultimately develop skills to be able to free people from their legal issues and their entanglements.

Will Thompson: I think one thing that I want to teach not only law students but also members of this firm is that litigation is not always the answer. Sometimes picking up a phone and seeing if we can get a situation resolved is a better solution for your client. I love to litigate. I've spent my entire career in courtrooms, very comfortable in courtrooms, but I also realize litigation is very slow, it's very expensive, and it doesn't always get the best result. So trying to educate the students and also lawyers—and perhaps more importantly in the private practice, clients—that this is the best solution. Yes, we can go win this matter, but a phone call of “let's fix this situation before we have to litigate it” might serve us better in the end.

Steve Chanley: After being in private practice for many years, you were appointed to the bench as a circuit judge in West Virginia. Is that the trial court system in West Virginia?

Will Thompson: Yes, I was a trial court judge of general jurisdiction.

Steve Chanley: How much of a transition was it to go from private practice to the bench?

Will Thompson: It obviously was a transition, but it was one I felt pretty well suited for because I was a litigator. I was in that particular courtroom probably three or four days out of five every week. When I first started practicing law, we did not have a public defender and the youngest lawyer in town generally becomes the de facto public defender. So I got thrown to the wolves pretty quickly. So I felt comfortable in the courtroom. Now, obviously being a judge is a much different role than being an advocate. I actually found it to be a little harder transition—not going from an advocate to a judge, but going from a judge to a U.S. attorney—because I had to take a role as an advocate once again. So there is some transition. It is a different way of thinking when you are representing people versus when you're trying to make the right decision based on the facts and law. So there is an adjustment period.

Steve Chanley: Let's talk about that a little bit. In 2021, you were sworn in as the United States attorney for the Southern District of West Virginia. Can you tell our listeners what a United States attorney who's in charge of federal law enforcement in an entire federal judicial district does on a day-to-day basis?

Will Thompson: Typically the U.S. attorneys are referred to as the chief law enforcement officer in the district. And that's pretty true. Basically, as I would tell people, I get to tell the FBI what to do, which is a pretty cool job to have. Now, I didn't tell the FBI what to do. We worked hand in hand and had a great relationship with them. But basically you coordinate the federal prosecutions, the federal criminal investigations—through your own work and through the work of your assistant United States attorneys—and decide what cases to prosecute, what priorities you want to have for an office. Now there's another role of a U.S. attorney that—well, there's many roles—but there's one role that people don't pay a lot of attention to: we also represent the United States in all of its civil litigation. And that could be where the United States is instituting a civil action against someone, such as an enforcement action, or where someone is suing the United States and we are representing the United States on that. My background as a judge—obviously I enjoyed the criminal prosecution part of it. That was fun. But given my background as a judge, I also enjoyed the civil side of the office and managing the litigation that came from there. Some cases you don't get to pick. If the United States gets sued, we represent them. But some of the enforcement actions, I really appreciated that. Also represented some frustrations. There were some things I would have liked to have done that required approval from main justice in D.C. that we didn't get to do. And I won't talk too much about that, but that was a frustrating part of the job. You also are managing the office. My office had 35 lawyers working in it across

three different locations. So you're basically the head of a—probably for West Virginia—a medium to large law firm.

Steve Chanley: While you were the United States attorney in the Southern District of West Virginia, your district became the national leader in prosecuting fraud cases. Was there an initiative that you implemented that focused on bankruptcy fraud?

Will Thompson: There was an initiative that I instituted where I wanted to do more work with respect to what I call white collar crime—crime on paper. Don't get me wrong, we prosecuted a ton of drug cases, gun cases, violent crime type cases. But I also wanted to be known as the U.S. attorney who would also prosecute the people who were, how can I say it, members of country clubs and things of that nature who were stealing money through different methods. I had a wonderful relationship with our bankruptcy trustee, our bankruptcy judge. I had two young AUSAs who I had hired who really took an interest in it, and cases that had maybe languished before or were ignored before—I said, let's take a look at them and see what we can do. And we were finding that there was a significant number of people who were trying to cheat the system through bankruptcy fraud, trying to hide assets, and we prosecuted those.

Steve Chanley: You also successfully prosecuted several other notable cases. One of them involved the conviction of eight prison guards for murder. Can you tell us about that case?

Will Thompson: That was probably my most important case and it's the case that will stand out. This was a case where an inmate at a local jail facility named Quantas Burks was beaten to death one night. There was no real reason or justification for it. It was a very gruesome video to watch. It was a very gruesome case to prosecute. And it struck home with me, especially in my role as a judge and also as a U.S. attorney—I'm responsible for a lot of people being in jail. And I used to feel very comfortable telling family members of someone who I was putting in jail that the person is safe there. West Virginia was the hotbed of the opioid epidemic. I put a lot of people in jail and also got a lot of people treatment who suffered from opioid addiction. Sometimes you had to put them in jail to protect them from themselves before we get them into treatment. But the fact that I can no longer tell people that their loved one is safer in jail than they would be on the streets really bothered me. We took a very aggressive stance in this case, ultimately successful. We had one of the eight who decided to go to trial—convicted him. Two came in initially that helped, two more came in after the indictments, and then three, once they realized what evidence we had, they came in and entered pleas. The fourth and final one went to trial. I think as a society, we have a duty to protect people that we incarcerate. We need to make sure they're safer there than they would be on the street. And in this case, the person wasn't. And there was no reason for this. This was not a fight that got out of hand or anything of that nature. This was a guy who was

probably having a medical episode, yet beaten to death because somebody's feelings were hurt.

Steve Chanley: You also successfully prosecuted several law enforcement officers for human trafficking and sexual exploitation crimes against children. Do you find it hard to comprehend how individuals who have the authority and responsibility for enforcing the law and to protect the public can commit crimes of that nature?

Will Thompson: I found it actually disgusting. I come from a family of law enforcement. The first two sheriffs of the county I grew up in were named William Thompson—were my forefathers. My uncles, first cousins, everybody—they've been state troopers, county sheriffs. So when we would have a picnic growing up, there would be a lot of law enforcement officers there and I respect them. I was taught, I was brought up that you respect law enforcement. That when a person puts on a uniform and a badge, they're serving their community and you should respect that. And I would also like to point out, I have a lot of friends who are in law enforcement, and I would get the equivalence of high fives from law enforcement members quite a bit when they knew that we were prosecuting these people, because they don't want to be associated with these people either. I actually tried one of the cases myself, which—number one, it was fun to do to get back in the courtroom and be an advocate. Number two, I wanted to show that this is how serious we take these cases.

Steve Chanley: Your office also prosecuted several high-profile white collar cases. Can you tell us about that?

Will Thompson: Like I said, one of my initiatives coming in was to do more of the white collar type. We did several of those. The internet fraud happens every day. It happened to me a week ago where someone tried to impersonate an email and tried to take advantage of me—which I had some fun with that. On some type of internet scam, we had businesses that were constantly getting scammed by some type of phishing attempt or something of that nature. So we made it a priority. We wanted to do what we could, not only to prosecute the cases that we had—and we were able to successfully prosecute several of those—we even were able to prosecute some transnational. We had some grad students here from out of the country. They were able to prosecute. I would have liked to have got the person back in Ghana who was actually doing this. Unfortunately, we didn't, but we were able to prosecute some of their boots on the ground.

Steve Chanley: That's impressive. Were there any particular challenges in prosecuting transnational fraud?

Will Thompson: Yes, jurisdiction and extradition are always challenges. We were able to prosecute some of the individuals who were physically present in the U.S., but getting

to the people overseas—the ones orchestrating the scams—is much more difficult. You're dealing with international law, cooperation from foreign governments, and sometimes limited resources. But we did what we could to disrupt the operations and hold accountable those within our reach.

Steve Chanley: Looking back on your time as U.S. Attorney, what are you most proud of?

Will Thompson: I'm proud of the culture we built in the office. We had a team that was committed to justice, not just convictions. We took on hard cases—cases that mattered. Whether it was prosecuting violent crime, rooting out corruption, or protecting vulnerable populations, we tried to do the right thing every time. And I'm proud of the mentorship and development we provided to young attorneys. I wanted them to leave the office better lawyers than when they came in.

Steve Chanley: What's next for you?

Will Thompson: Right now, I'm focused on my role at Appalachian School of Law. I want to help shape the next generation of lawyers—to prepare them not just to pass the bar, but to thrive in practice, to serve their communities, and to lead with integrity. I'll continue my work with Spillman Thomas and Battle, and I'll keep looking for ways to contribute, whether through teaching, mentoring, or problem-solving. I've had a rewarding career, and I want to give back.

Steve Chanley: Will Thompson, thank you for your time and for sharing your insights. It's been a pleasure.

Will Thompson: Thank you. I've enjoyed it.

Steve Chanley: If someone listening wants to reach out to you—whether it's a student, a practitioner, or someone interested in your mentorship program—what's the best way to get in touch?

Will Thompson: The easiest way is through my email at the Appalachian School of Law. It's wthompson@asl.edu. I check it regularly and I'm happy to hear from students, alumni, or anyone interested in legal education, mentorship, or collaboration. I also still have a profile on the Spillman Thomas and Battle website, so folks can find me there as well.

Steve Chanley: That's great. Will Thompson, thank you again for your time and for sharing your experience and insights. It's been a real pleasure.

Will Thompson: Thank you, Steve. I've enjoyed the conversation.