

UVA LAW | Admissible PILA Tommy Whiteley_mixeddown

NATALIE BLAZER: So what is the most deadly animal on a safari? I've heard that it's a hippopotamus.

TOMMY The hippos are pound for pound probably the most dangerous. The Cape buffalo are aggressive or rhinos.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE Rhinos. OK.

BLAZER:

TOMMY There's a lot out there.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE I think the takeaway is have a trusted guide.

BLAZER:

TOMMY Exactly.

WHITELEY:

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NATALIE This is *Admissible*. I'm Natalie Blazer, Dean of Admissions at UVA Law. My guest today is first-year law student
BLAZER: Tommy Whiteley. Tommy graduated from Brown University in 2022 with a degree in political science and received his master of science in global governance and diplomacy from the University of Oxford in 2023.

Prior to beginning law school, Tommy worked on political campaigns and spent time as a Safari guide in Kenya, which I am definitely going to ask about more later in the show. Welcome to the show, Tommy.

TOMMY Thank you so much for having me.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE So listeners may remember that last year, the Public Interest Law Association, or PILA, as it is more commonly
BLAZER: known, reached out to me and asked if I would auction off a guest spot on *Admissible* to help raise money for their summer grant program, which supports our law students working in public service.

Well, last year, of course, I agreed that public service summer grant supported me in law school. I really wanted to pay it forward. That resulted in our now graduate, Jeremy Kass. He graduated in the class of 2023. Jeremy came on the show and shared his love of tax law, which was a super fun episode. If you didn't listen to that one yet, definitely go back and check out season two, episode two.

Well, this fall, PILA reached out to me again to auction off a guest spot. And I absolutely could not say no to such a good cause. So that is how Tommy got in the guest chair today through the PILA auction. So before we get into the topic of today's show, I need to know, Tommy, what possessed you to bid on a guest spot on the podcast.

TOMMY Yeah. So the first episode of *Admissible* came out right around when I was doing the LSAT for the first time. And
WHITELEY: so I listened to it then. And I have not missed an episode since. I am a big fan of the podcast. And I've continued listening to it after having been admitted.

NATALIE That makes me so happy. And how perfect timing because the very first episode was about the LSAT. Yeah, Oh
BLAZER: my gosh.

TOMMY It all comes full circle.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE I love that. And going to a good cause. And now you're here. That's so great. That's so great. So before we get
BLAZER: into our theme for today, I want to do an icebreaker. Where is your favorite place to go out to eat in Charlottesville?

TOMMY Ooh, I am partial to Continental Divide.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE Oh my God. My favorite.

BLAZER:

TOMMY It's just that is fantastic. I love going there. The Santa Fe enchilada, gotta go with that. It's very good margaritas.

WHITELEY: It's just--

NATALIE Red hot blues.

BLAZER:

TOMMY Yes. It's all really good. And then I do have to give a shout out to Tacos Gomez, which is a food truck. And it's
WHITELEY: phenomenal. And my friends in my section are from Texas. And they've testified to how good the food is. So that's--

NATALIE Really?

BLAZER:

TOMMY Yeah, that's a resounding endorsement in my book.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE I've never had Tacos Gomez. But I've had Continental Divide. I mean, that's been around since I was a student.

BLAZER: So I've probably, of all the places in Charlottesville, I think I can safely say I've eaten at what I call candy probably way more than any other restaurant. So if I ever see you there, I'll say hello.

OK. I'm really excited about the theme of today's show, which Tommy and I came up with after some brainstorming. I think it's something that a lot of people can relate to. And the topic is really embracing uncertainty in the law school application process, in law school, in life, in admissions.

The first thing I said when I came to the studio today is this is really resonating with me because admissions right now is very uncertain just in the big picture and also as we're trying to build a class. This cycle in particular is exceptionally slow. It's been a big upheaval, I think, for applicants and admissions offices with the Supreme Court decision, US news rankings.

Just so many factors have made it so that we're moving really slowly, which I think is difficult for applicants in what is already an uncertain process. So before we get into that, I want to talk about your path to law school. Tell us a little about yourself.

TOMMY WHITELEY: Yeah. So I arrived at the decision to apply to law school after a series of different passions led me there. So I had always grown up-- I think every kid grows up with a passion for animals. And then that fades away. And for me, it never did.

And so I was very interested in wildlife conservation. And so I did a lot of field work. I worked on ranches out west. And my realization was as important as all that research is, you have to have political buy-in to have these causes succeed.

And then I found out that I really enjoyed politics generally, which led me to international human rights. And then it all culminated in law. And so it wasn't until my senior fall of undergrad. I was taking a class on congressional investigations. And it was taught by a partner at a law firm.

And he approached me at the end of the semester. And he said, have you considered law school. I think you would be a good lawyer. You seem to this back and forth and trying to figure out the nuances. And by that time, I had already signed on to do the master's in diplomacy. So yeah, it was a quick turnaround in terms of realizing that law school was something I was interested in and the application process.

NATALIE BLAZER: But I love that because you did what I encourage people to do, which is follow what you're interested in. And it will lead you to where you need to go. So I think that's great. So during the application process, what elements in particular of your application do you think that you were unsure about or caused you the most anxiety? I feel like standardized testing for a lot of people is probably up there. The essay is like-- what was it that was the most challenging for you?

TOMMY WHITELEY: Yeah, the LSAT was definitely the most challenging element, I mean, obviously the test-taking component. But then once I had-- I took it twice. And the second score was only marginally better than the first.

There's just a lot of contradictory information. And you look at the percentile cutoffs for schools. And then it's easy to get discouraged. So it's getting too lost in the data I think was something that I had problems with. And in my case actually, I had to fly back across the Atlantic to take it. So I left on a Friday and took it on a Saturday morning--

NATALIE BLAZER: Oh my God.

TOMMY WHITELEY: --because of-- even though it was remote, I had to be within the continental US because otherwise there was going to be an IT issue. And it wouldn't have been registered as legitimate. So--

NATALIE BLAZER: Interesting.

TOMMY WHITELEY: --that added another layer to it as well.

NATALIE BLAZER: Yeah. Well, and in this day and age of the LSAT-- when I took the LSAT, which was 20 years ago, it was offered four times a year. You had to wake up super early on a Saturday. You had to go there. You had to fill it out like paper and pencil. And schools averaged your scores.

So you don't go into it thinking you're going to take it again. I think that was almost like simpler. I knew I was going to take it once. And that was going to be the score I was going to use. Now it's like, should I register for another test? Should I take it again?

People feel that they can take it infinite times because it's offered now I think eight times a year. And you can take it from home. And it's shorter. And it's just like score preview and canceling. And like it's just there is so much second-guessing, I think. You give people more options, and it just creates more anxiety.

TOMMY WHITELEY: Completely. And I think that generally with the whole process was the-- the uncertainty for me and I think for a lot of people is just contradictory information and too many options. And so more is not better in a lot of cases.

NATALIE BLAZER: Correct. And even though schools take the highest score now, we do, that doesn't mean that taking it five, six, seven, eight times to get that score is the best idea either. But I understand why people want to. Yeah, so that has changed.

But speaking of too much information and anxiety and conflicting information, during your cycle, were you on any message boards? Were you using any resources? I know you said that you started listening to this podcast. Were there other podcasts or just, I don't know, blogs or anything that you were taking advantage of? And how was that for you?

TOMMY WHITELEY: Yeah, I think two things. One, *Admissible* is a guiding light. Even if you're not applying to UVA, I highly recommend it because it was very clarifying, particularly those early episodes that were hyperfocused on the application process.

NATALIE BLAZER: Thank you.

TOMMY WHITELEY: That was extremely helpful. And then the other thing would be stay away from Reddit because that is not helpful. And thankfully, someone told me that early on. So I only went on it out of morbid curiosity. But that would be-- I think that would not be advantageous for your mental health going into this because you don't want to compare what's going on with your process to anyone else's, because it's inherently unique.

NATALIE BLAZER: And it's endless. You could just spend-- you're never going to get the answer that you want. And just two things. I've said this on the podcast before. But it is worth repeating. First of all, everyone on that law school admissions message board is your competitor. They don't necessarily have an incentive to give you accurate advice. That's the first thing.

The second thing is people don't know why they were admitted necessarily, or why they were denied, or why they were waitlisted. They can say I was admitted. And this is what I did in my app, so therefore, you should do that. Well, how do you know that's why you were admitted?

No, application is perfect. We often admit people in spite of something in their app. You don't know. We don't tell you in your offer letter, these are the things you did well. And these are the things-- you know?

So back to your application cycle. Ultimately, you opted to apply binding to UVA. So for those who don't know, if you apply through our BED option, which is Binding Early Decision, you get a decision quicker, like 21 business days. And then you know where you're going. Tell us how you decided to apply binding?

TOMMY Yeah. So I felt pretty comfortable with that decision. My closest friend from high school went to UVA as an
WHITELEY: undergrad. My brother is currently here as a fourth year undergrad. So I had visited UVA several times. And I knew at the onset of the law school application process that Charlottesville was somewhere that I would be very happy living. And UVA just has a reputation for just being a nice place to do law school.

NATALIE Yeah. And applying BED, I mean, you still-- leading up to sending your application in, you can have a long
BLAZER: process. But after you submit and your application goes complete, the nice thing about applying binding is if you're admitted, then your cycle, like you mentioned, is over pretty quickly in a good way.

TOMMY Yeah, from the decision to apply to when I was admitted was just under six months, which is a quick turnaround
WHITELEY: time.

NATALIE So I understand the decision to apply binding. You had already been to Charlottesville. You have a brother who's
BLAZER: here. All of that makes perfect sense why you were comfortable committing. So when you got here as a one out, what was your first impression? How was that?

TOMMY Despite having been to Charlottesville a couple of times, I had never actually been to the law school before the
WHITELEY: first day of orientation because I was over in England for the revisit day in the spring.

I liked how structured the orientation was because it forces you-- if you're someone like me who can tend to be somewhat introverted in a new environment, it forced you to interact with a lot of people really quickly, which I know I need. And I found that I got into the social rhythm actually quicker than the academic adjustment, which is not something that I was expecting going in.

NATALIE That's how I felt when I came here. I had no idea it was going to be the social, supportive environment that it
BLAZER: was. Again, going back to-- there was just a lot less information out there 20 years ago.

But yeah, I do think that helps with the academic ramp up, though, because if you feel comfortable and you feel like you have a support network and you've made friends and you're finding your way around Charlottesville, I think it puts you in a better headspace to dive in.

TOMMY Completely. And I think there's just a level of comfortability that helps in the classroom. I was one of the first to--
WHITELEY: actually, I was the first in our contracts class to get cold called. And I am not ashamed to admit that I blew it.

NATALIE Oh, no.
BLAZER:

TOMMY And everyone was very encouraging. I had fully read the case. They were very difficult questions.
WHITELEY:

NATALIE What was the case? Do you remember?
BLAZER:

TOMMY It was *Leonard v Estes*. So very early on in contracts. And I just flubbed it. But everyone in my section just came
WHITELEY: up and said, it's all good. But it made it so much easier.

NATALIE I think that's so genuine and authentic. And I think people also recognize that's going to happen to everyone, you
BLAZER: know?

TOMMY Yeah.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE It's not like you taught me you're going to be the only one to not nail a cold call. That's going to happen to all of
BLAZER: us. So I want to talk now about-- you've only done one semester of 1L.

You're now starting in-- you've been back here, what, three weeks, three or four weeks in the spring semester. Do you feel like the academics, you now have the hang of it and it's, quote unquote, "easier" second semester? Or how are you feeling?

TOMMY I think on the academic front, I feel more confident going into it, that I know what I'm doing. But I will say I feel
WHITELEY: like I have less time to do it than I did in the fall. The recruitment process starts up. I'm doing the journal tryouts this coming weekend.

There's a lot more to keep in the air at the same time. But I'm enjoying the classes a lot. And I think having those skill sets in terms of being able to read faster and take notes more effectively and find what's important in a case is something that I have continued to improve on but definitely accrued a good amount during the first term.

NATALIE It's a skill like anything else. First, the reading can seem so dense. And it takes hours and hours and hours. But
BLAZER: the more you do it, yeah, you build up that ability and stamina really, which it can take.

So I definitely want to talk more about the job search and electives and extracurriculars a little bit later. Since we talked about the social support, tell me a little bit about your own social style.

I know that when we were talking about the subject for the show, it's like UVA can seem like a very extroverted, stereotypical, outgoing type of-- a place for that type of personality. So tell me a little bit about when you were coming in, what your expectations were.

TOMMY Yeah, I think part of the reason I didn't ultimately apply to UVA as an undergraduate was because on the tours,
WHITELEY: all a lot of emphasis was put on Greek life and going out. And at the time, I didn't feel like I had that in me to be on that much.

That was a concern in law school, obviously not enough to not apply binding. But my thought process was, it would be UVA in the sense of the social element. And that would permeate the law school. But it would be tempered by the fact that people are in law school.

So I thought it would be manageable. And frankly, I just thought it would be good for my personal development because I think law is such a hypersocial profession, that it's-- the skills that you're accumulating in terms of speaking and just social interaction are incredibly useful in their own right.

NATALIE Yes, people think of UVA as with the really strong community and the culture and softball. It is known for that.
BLAZER: And I'm very proud of that because I think it's a great place to go to law school. You can get the best job out there but also enjoy your three years. And that's like you can get the best education possible and enjoy your three years. You can have the best faculty. All those things, I think really proud of that.

But that doesn't mean that everyone we admit is like the super extrovert or super social, certainly not. And we want those people just as much as we want the social types. So you mentioned journal tryouts. This is like a quintessential 1L thing. That's on your plate this coming weekend, it sounds like. How are you feeling about that?

TOMMY I, frankly, have not had enough time to be nervous about it.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE Great. That's great.

BLAZER:

TOMMY So that works. Part of my interest in law school was I really enjoy reading and writing and editing. So honestly,

WHITELEY: I'm very excited just to see how it all pans out.

NATALIE The journal tryout itself I think is just a great exercise and great skill building. Anything you can do to challenge yourself and build your skills as a budding attorney is great. I'm curious, how do you manage even just deciding what to do? Because there are so many different things. And of course, you can't do everything. So how do you navigate that?

BLAZER:

TOMMY Yeah, I think the same way that I try to approach everything, which is organically, if it's something that I'm genuinely interested in, then it's not going to feel like a burden. It won't feel like work.

WHITELEY:

And I think just accepting that you can't do everything is useful off the bat. I may have slightly over enlisted myself in the fall. But then you have the opportunity in your 2L year to pursue leadership positions in certain organizations that I care particularly about. So there's that opportunity.

NATALIE So can you share? What are you involved in?

BLAZER:

TOMMY Yeah, so I am part of the national security law forum, the J.B. Moore International Law Society Common Law Grounds, which seeks to foster bipartisan conversations about tough topics on campus, which is very interesting.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE How has that's been going?

BLAZER:

TOMMY Very well, actually. We had lunch on Monday where we were talking about the role of US foreign policy. And that can be fraught, particularly in the contemporary era. And we had a great turnout. And everyone was very civil and just very interested in hearing what other people have to say. And then I'm also part of the Virginia Law One for the World. So you commit to pledge 1% of your future earnings towards effective giving.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE Wow, that's great.

BLAZER:

TOMMY Yeah, it's been a great--

WHITELEY:

NATALIE I don't think I even knew about that organization.

BLAZER:

TOMMY It's a great group. I think it's relatively new to the law school. And yeah, I'm looking forward to getting more involved with them as I go forward.

WHITELEY:

NATALIE BLAZER: That's great. Speaking of future earnings, you mentioned you're in the recruitment process. You're 1L, so you have to think about this summer. But you're also thinking ahead. And so talk to us a little bit about how that career search process has been going for you.

TOMMY WHITELEY: Yeah. So thankfully, I was able to figure out the 1L job relatively quickly. It was in January. I'm going to be working at the US Attorney's Office in Miami, which will be fun.

NATALIE BLAZER: Wow, Miami? Cool.

TOMMY WHITELEY: The International Narcotics and Money Laundering Unit, which should be really interesting.

NATALIE BLAZER: Awesome.

TOMMY WHITELEY: But yeah, with the 2L process, it's amazing to me how early it starts.

NATALIE BLAZER: It is, yeah.

TOMMY WHITELEY: But again, it's just you're in it with a majority of the class. And so it's, what did you think of this firm? or I can't make it to the reception tonight. Can you tell me what the impression was? And so there is a divide and conquer element, which I'm pretty confident you would not get at a lot of law schools, which is nice.

NATALIE BLAZER: Sure. Oh, man.

TOMMY WHITELEY: I had a firm dinner last night, which was lovely.

NATALIE BLAZER: And so that is for, just so we're clear, next summer?

TOMMY WHITELEY: Yeah.

NATALIE BLAZER: So February of your 1L year and you're having a firm dinner for summer 2025 following your 2L year?

TOMMY WHITELEY: Yeah.

NATALIE BLAZER: Oh my goodness.

TOMMY Yeah, so it's a lot. But also I have to say, I've now batted around. I've met with people in the Office of Clerkships, **WHITELEY:** Private Practice, and Public Service. And they're phenomenal. Particularly for someone who doesn't have any attorneys in his family, that is really ease the process.

NATALIE Yeah. And when you came into law school, did you have a general sense of what type of law you wanted to do, or **BLAZER:** were you open? Because I think that in and of itself can cause uncertainty, like, oh God, do I take the public service job this summer, or do I try to work at a firm? Well, what will set me up the best for next summer? How did you decide on this 1L summer job? And do you feel like a lot of people have that kind of decision paralysis?

TOMMY I think it's definitely a pervasive issue. The people who had-- that I did reach out to prior to law school **WHITELEY:** recommended a general path. And they said, do something that interests you the first summer, whether that's in public service or whether you do want to go directly to try to do private practice.

And then join the majority of your grade in doing private practice after your second year. And then you've sort of covered your bases. And you can see what was really interesting to you, what you found the most meaningful.

So I think I stuck to-- I just internalized that and stuck with that as an overall strategy. But in terms of particular practice areas, I mean, when I arrived at law school, I could not have told you the difference between litigation, or regulatory, or corporate.

Admittedly, I'm still parsing that out as I go through this process, which is difficult. And it is probably the most uncertainty that I've felt when you're sitting down with a recruiter and they say, well, what element of law do you want to do? And you're not sure.

NATALIE You're like, I just started 1L year. What do you mean? I have a lot to say about this. So first of all, keeping an **BLAZER:** open mind I think is very important. Some people come in saying, I know what I'm going to do. I know that I want to do this. And I say, OK, well, you haven't taken a criminal law class yet.

You don't actually know that you want to be a prosecutor or a public defender or whatever. Having a firm desire to-- having that passion is great. But also keeping an open mind is important. So that's the first thing.

The second thing is a law degree, especially from UVA law, is so fungible and so just valuable. So you can go in-- you could go in the summer. And as cool as your job sounds, you can be like, wow, this is not for me. You don't have to stay in that job. So same thing with next summer, oh gosh, private practice, not what I thought. OK, I'm going to pivot.

Having the career resources here, having the value of the law degree, you will be just fine. And I think more and more and more, legal careers just aren't linear. The people in your class who actually stick around and are partners at the law firm where they started, this is going to be like 1%.

So people get so anxious about, should I go to this firm or this firm? Well, ultimately, you're not committing to the next 30 years of your life, really, you're not. You're going to go to a great firm or you're going to go to a great clerkship or a great public interest job. And you're going to build your skill set. And you're going to be trained as an attorney.

And then if you like that job and you want to stay in it for 20 years, amazing. But most of the time, that's not what happens. That's going to launch you into a different sector. And that's going to launch you into something else. I never thought I would be doing admissions. I just thought, I'm going to this great law firm in New York and see how it goes.

So I think it ties back to what you said about really following what you're interested in and having the faith that with your law degree, I know the economy can be scary and all of that. And that's what our career counselors are there for, to help you navigate, even when unexpected things happen.

And before we go, I have to ask, because this has been a trip I've wanted to go on since I was about five years old, which is I want to go to Africa, specifically Kenya. You talked about being into wildlife and wildlife conservation. But how did you get this job? What was that like?

TOMMY WHITELEY: Yeah, so weirdly, my family has known this family of guides in Kenya since the '60s. So my great-grandfather went on an expedition in the late '60s with the current owner of the camps, grandfather. My parents went on their honeymoon with the current owner of the camp, who became my boss.

And we were fortunate enough to go on Safari as a family in 2011. I came armed with all my wildlife knowledge. So I was standing in the back of the Safari vehicle and pointing out the animals and just being a precocious tween and saying, well, here's all everything I know about that animal.

And he, the owner of the camp who was guiding us, said, if you want to come back when you're a little bit older, we would love to have you work as a guide. So after my freshman year of high school, I flew over to Kenya alone and spent three and a half weeks working as a guide.

It was a phenomenal experience. And it's hard to imagine that I can ever top that as a work experience. But--

NATALIE BLAZER: I know. I don't know. And as a lawyer, probably not. I mean, tell me if I'm wrong. But if there were ever a time where you need to embrace uncertainty, it would be when you're like among lions and hippopotamuses. And you don't know what's going to happen, or do you?

TOMMY WHITELEY: No, you don't. While I was there, I was helping film a documentary about a conservation project with the Maasai tribe. But I was shooting an interview in the hills behind the camp. And I heard some rustling behind me in a bush. And I just reached down. And I grabbed a rock, not that that was going to do anything but just as a false sense of comfort.

And then we continued filming. And then about 30 seconds later, a lion ran out about 15 feet down the path from us, just straight across. But these guides who have been there forever, you take a little solace in them because he was like, OK, can we keep filming now? I'm like, well, aren't there lions? He's like, they're fine. So that was peak uncertainty. So then not knowing which law firm is slightly less adrenaline-inducing.

NATALIE BLAZER: It feels less. Yes. Well, Tommy, this was so great. I could talk to you for hours about safaris. And maybe we'll do that another time. Is there anything else you want to make sure our listeners know about law school, the application process, anything at all before we go?

TOMMY WHITELEY: I think just if you were-- we've been talking about uncertainty. And I think the one thing you maybe don't want to be uncertain about is whether you want to do law school because it's a big commitment financially in terms of time.

So uncertainty is great. But don't take uncalculated risks, particularly when it involves a considerable investment and a lot of time, because then when you encounter this uncertainty in the law school, it'll really make you second-guess what you're doing. And you don't want to be in that position. So avoiding that at all costs.

NATALIE BLAZER: Yes. There is a fine line between not really knowing what type of law you want to do and not really knowing what to expect in law school and not really sure if you're going to enjoy it. There's a fine line between that and not knowing if you want to go to law school.

And for people in that latter camp who aren't sure, absolutely take the time to figure that out. There is no rush. Law school, knock on wood, will always be here for you. You cannot start this process. You can't jump into 1L year if you don't have a firm grip on why you're in law school.

TOMMY WHITELEY: Yeah. No, I think if you know that you want to do law school, I am very much enjoying it. And I think if you go in with that mindset, you're going to get a lot of great new friends and information. And it's just going to open up a lot of doors. And be willing to explore new things and being open to things and, yeah, just embracing what you don't know.

NATALIE BLAZER: Exactly. Well, Tommy, thank you so much for coming on the show, for supporting PILA, for supporting public interest grants for our students. That's incredible. This was really fun.

TOMMY WHITELEY: Yeah, I'm very happy I finally got a chance to come on and be on the other side of it.

NATALIE BLAZER: It was great.

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This has been *Admissible* with me, Dean Natalie Blazer, at the University of Virginia School of Law. My guest today was first-year law student Tommy Whiteley. For more information about UVA Law, please visit law.virginia.edu.

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