

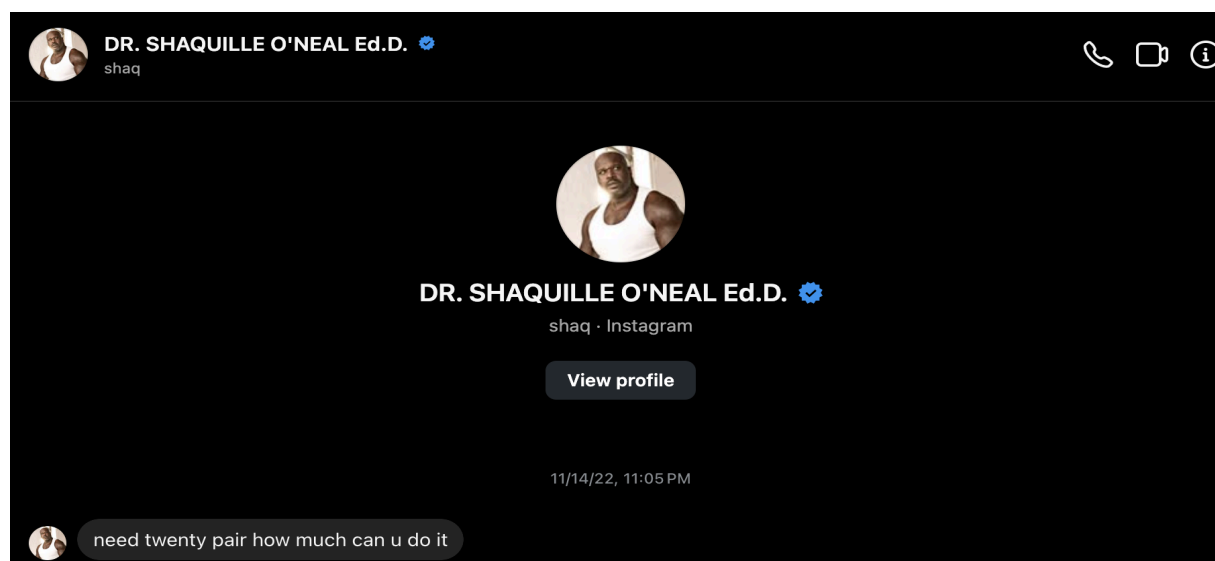


# MySHAQStory

## How It All Happened

2nd Blog Entry

By Rocky I. Parrish



### When Shaq Reached Out

When Shaquille O'Neal reached out to me on November 14, 2022, and I didn't realize it until November 21, so many thoughts went through my mind.

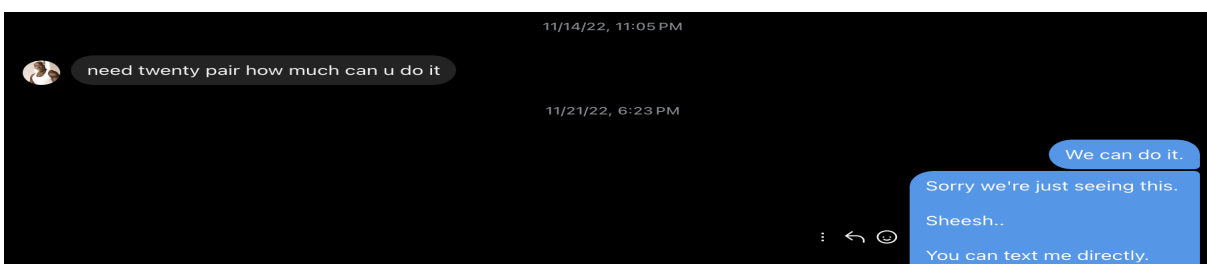
Mind you, Shaq wasn't the first person who has ever reached out to me on social media or Instagram for that matter. But outside of Marcus Lemonis from the show *The Profit*, Shaq was by far the most unexpected.

When I saw the DM, I wasn't sure it was real. I clicked on the profile and realized it was indeed him. My immediate thought was: *Did I just f\*\* this up by not seeing it for seven days?\**

Another thought came right behind it: *Would this just be another situation where I met someone famous and it didn't really result in anything?*

I shouted out to my wife Dez, who was on another floor, and told her what Shaq had said. Her response was simple: *"Did you reply?"*

At that moment, I realized I should have done that immediately. So I replied.



Not even two hours later, Shaq responded again, reiterating that he liked my work and was interested in buying in bulk. I told him that when he had a moment, he could give me a call. Less than five minutes later, my phone rang. It was The Big Aristotle himself.

I won't go into all the details of the conversation, but I will say this: we spoke like we had known one another for years. When he asked if I would be interested in doing a collaboration with Reebok, as he had just become an owner, I said yes without hesitation.

It was a down-to-earth, straight-to-the-point conversation that I wasn't expecting. It felt like this could be the one. Still, I tempered my excitement. I've been in situations before where big names reached out and nothing materialized. So I stayed focused on the project at hand and the realities around me.

But the reality was this: I had a huge, life-changing situation about to unfold that could derail everything.

## What Shaq Didn't Know Yet

If this is your first time reading my blog and you're not familiar with my story, here's a quick backstory (for the full details, read my first blog post on this site).

In 2019, I was charged with a felony for fudging numbers on my business loan application. I was sentenced to 24 months in prison but only served six months in a prison camp before being released to home confinement.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic shutting down nearly everything, including the justice system, my sentencing hearing wasn't held until November 2022. I was set to self-surrender January 3, 2023.

Now that you have that brief backstory, you can probably see the problem: *How was I going to handle the Shaq Custom Sneaker Project from prison?*

Before January 3, I wanted to be fully transparent with Shaq. I owed him that much. I didn't want him to find out about my situation from anyone else or in any other way.

As you probably know, Shaquille O'Neal is also DJ Diesel. Between calling NBA games, holiday events, and off-season gigs, he is constantly on the move. I can't remember exactly where he was at the time, but I know he had a big New Year's Eve event lined up.



I texted him to ask if he had time for a quick video chat. He agreed and told me to call him later that night. When I did, he was at a restaurant. It was loud, so I said, *“Hey, I can wait until you’re somewhere more private.”*

We tried to connect a few more times before January 3, but it never happened.

## Who Would Be Me While I Was Gone?

On January 3, 2023, I was set to self-surrender at Lewisburg USP Camp in Pennsylvania. I had to prepare for the reality that someone else would have to take the reins in my absence.

There was only one person I could trust and had faith in to handle this project while I was gone.

That person was my wife, Desireé.



While she was nervous, she was prepared to step in and do whatever was necessary to make sure this project moved forward. I had more faith in her than she had in herself. I reminded her that she would be the CEO of ROCKDEEP and that she was already the CEO of her own company, RDevine, a

business she has run like a boss ever since I gifted it to her when we got engaged. (That's a story for another future blog.)

We were also wrapping up a Pop-Up shop at Ft. Belvoir Army Base AAFES Exchange during the holidays. On top of everything else on our plate, I knew she could handle it.



In my absence, she would also have help from my Chief of Staff and longtime friend, Rudy Scott, and from our new seasonal hire, Lelahni, a high school senior who was mature and wise beyond her years.

## Preparing for My Absence

During that time, I was already working with my main factory project manager, Levi, on finding another factory capable of producing Shaq's custom size 23 sneakers. We were finalizing materials for the outsole and getting designs locked in.

I made sure to set up as much as possible: style selection, color choices, materials, and technical packages, all sent to Levi in advance. I documented everything I could for Dez to follow, even though I knew we'd still be able to talk on the phone. My goal was to do as much heavy lifting as I could before surrendering so as not to overload her.

She already deals with anxiety, and I wanted to minimize the weight on her shoulders.

But here's what every founder or C-Suite leader knows: no matter how much you document, there will always be gaps. There are things we do every day that we don't even realize are critical until we're gone. Those nuances can't always be written down.

I knew that when those moments came up, Dez could call me, and I'd walk her through them. At least, that's what I thought.



## Unforeseen Problems

When I arrived at Lewisburg, I assumed I'd be able to call Dez that same day. That assumption was dead wrong.

After being processed, I was told I tested positive for COVID-19. The protocol for new arrivals was quarantine for 14 days. Not in the camp, but up the hill in the actual prison. Solitary.

I asked my case manager if I could call my wife to let her know. He looked at me and reminded me, *"You're in prison now. That's not going to happen."* He said if she called, they'd tell her.

Of course, she called. Of course, no one told her.

Meanwhile, my wife and youngest daughter also had COVID. Dez was sick, panicked, and completely in the dark about me.

So there I was, sitting in solitary, writing letters I couldn't send to my wife. In that time, I also filled over 40 pages (front & back) with ideas for ROCKDEEP, concepts for Shaq, and thoughts about life.

When quarantine ended, I thought I could finally call home. Wrong again. At camp, you still have to wait to be fully processed into the system before you can use the phones or even buy commissary. That took another two weeks.

Without going into detail, some good dudes at the camp from DC, Maryland, and Virginia looked out and assisted me in speaking to my wife.

At that point, I didn't care about ROCKDEEP or Shaq's project. I just wanted Dez to know I was alive and okay.

## Constant Challenges

After a few weeks, when I finally had phone privileges, I was able to catch up with Dez and start piecing everything together.

As time went on, challenges turned into obstacles, and obstacles turned into barriers. Dez sometimes worried that I thought she was letting me down. The truth was the opposite. She was doing more than anyone could expect.

I always joked, then half-seriously reinforced, the idea of W.W.R.D. (What Would Rocky Do?). I even got wristbands made for the team. It wasn't ego. It was about giving them confidence and

empowering them to do the job I entrusted them with. If they were ever unsure, they could fall back on that mindset.

Through it all, Dez reminded me of the woman she was when we first dated. She didn't let her anxiety show, at least not to me, and she took any guidance I was able to provide and ran with it. I was proud of her then. I'm even prouder now.

## Keeping Shaq in the Loop

While all this was happening, I knew Shaq didn't expect an overnight process. Still, I worried about the pace of progress at the factory.

Dez worried that Levi wasn't taking direction from her because she was a woman. At times, I had to step in through her, sending notes to remind him that while I was "away on business," she was me.

Communication improved, then slipped, then improved again. It was a cycle. Meanwhile, I wanted to make sure Shaq was kept updated.

Before I left, I asked my friend Goodie to act as my voice for ROCKDEEP on social media and email. He reached out to Shaq when updates were needed. To Shaq's credit, he was always patient and supportive. His responses were encouraging: *"No worries."*

But even then, he still didn't know the full story of where I was.

## Coming Home

I was originally supposed to be released on May 24, 2023, then bumped to May 30. Thanks to bureaucracy and some behind-the-scenes nonsense. There were a few scares along the way, and several attempts to keep me longer by a few individuals who didn't like that I was able to go home so soon. None of those individuals were fellow inmates.

*(For the details on that, check out a future blog or book.)*

I was finally released to home confinement June 22nd 2023. When I finally walked out, all I cared about was being home with my family.



The project wasn't even on my mind until the next morning, June 23.

## Almost Seven Months Later

By then, it had been nearly seven months since Shaq and I first spoke. He had been cool and patient, but I knew he had to be wondering: *What the hell is taking so long?*

I sent him pictures of samples as they came along. I apologized for every delay. I didn't make excuses. Every problem was my responsibility.

I'm usually a positive, optimistic person. But even I knew that if Shaq never wanted to work with me again, I couldn't blame him. Other independents had already made sneakers for him. I knew what we created was better in quality and comfort, but I also knew I had let myself down, and maybe him too.

When the first batch of sneakers finally arrived, I almost lost it. Some pairs had warped outsoles from extreme heat during shipping and warehousing. Others came in dirty.



The factory knew this was unacceptable. I tore into them and demanded replacements. Factories usually make extras of each style and color for production samples. I told them I wanted those. They resisted, saying they needed them for future production. I knew they had more pairs than they were admitting. I told them to either make more or split the pairs they had.

Eventually, they agreed.

On August 22, 2023, almost nine months to the day after that first call, we shipped the first package to Shaq. Two weeks later, we shipped the replacements. Both shipments included custom dust bags Dez made and a one-of-one oversized ROCKDEEP backpack designed years ago for athletes.

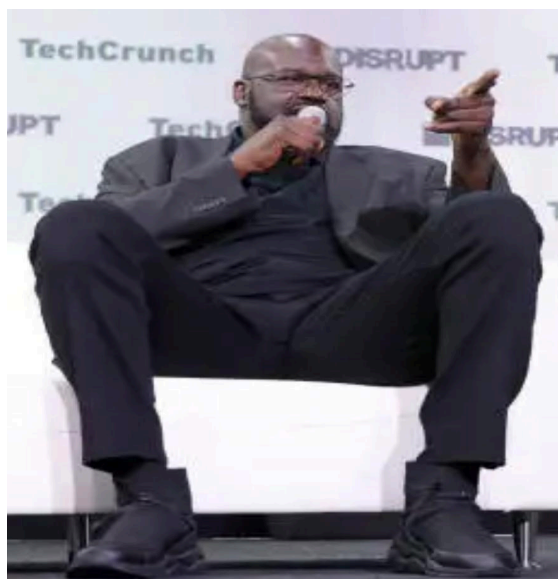


## A Letter to Shaq

Along with the sneakers we shipped, I wrote Shaq a letter.

I thanked him for the opportunity. I apologized for the long delays. I told him the truth about my situation and apologized again for not being able to tell him before I left for six months.

I don't know if he read it. But I do know he texted back that he loved the kicks. The first time I saw him wearing them was at TechCrunch Disrupt.



Since then, it hasn't come up. We've remained in touch. He keeps doing Shaq things: mentoring his son at Reebok, DJing as Diesel, and doing random acts of generosity as a humanitarian.

We haven't done anything else together yet. Maybe we will. Maybe we won't. If we don't, I'll know I played a big part in that. But either way, I'll always be grateful for the opportunity he gave me and ROCKDEEP.

## **Final Thoughts for Aspiring Founders**

To aspiring designers, entrepreneurs, and founders: let this be both an inspiration and a cautionary tale.

Inspiration, because a kid from Alexandria had Shaquille O'Neal call him to talk sneakers.

Caution, because my own mistakes nearly cost me the chance to see it through the right way.

Had I not made the mistakes I did, I would have been home for my family and fully focused on this project. Instead, I put that stress on my wife's shoulders.

My prior mistakes may continue to affect me in negative ways, but I won't let them define me. I own them daily and learn from them. I won't let them deter me from pushing forward and achieving future successes.

I have a responsibility to my family and myself to do what it takes to reach my goals, not blame anyone else if I fall short. I certainly can't rely on others to obtain those successes.

This wasn't the end of my story. Just another chapter.