

COVER STORY: Standing Tall

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When Jonathan Isaac made the decision not to kneel during the national anthem in the 2020 NBA season, he wasn't trying to go viral, and he certainly wasn't chasing controversy. What he was doing, instead, was choosing to stand—literally and spiritually—on the unshakable ground of his Christian faith.

That bold moment, in the midst of an intense cultural moment ignited by the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, didn't just define Isaac's public image; it catalyzed a personal journey of courage, conviction, and calling. As the NBA world watched in stunned silence and social media exploded with reactions, Isaac stood upright, Bible-centered and God-led, declaring by his actions: Christ alone is King.

Faith Over Fear

"You cannot stand for God and God not stand for you." Those words, spoken by Pastor Dr. Deron Hepburn of Jump Ministries in Orlando, gave Isaac the clarity and courage to go through with a decision that could have cost him his career. He had not yet signed a contract extension. He was a young player with much to lose. But the cost of silence weighed more heavily than the cost of criticism.

"I knew what I could lose, but I kind of said, 'You know what? I'm willing to lose it if it's for Christ,'" Isaac recalls.

That night, Isaac prayed, asking God to purify his motives. "Let this really be about You," he whispered under his breath. "Don't let me try to take this for me." The following day, he

stood alone while all of his teammates knelt, wearing BLM T-shirts. The image went viral. The spiritual weight of the moment was not lost on him.

As reported later that night, Isaac described his decision, “I believe that Black lives matter. A lot went into my decision. It’s my thought that kneeling or wearing a ‘Black Lives Matter’ t-shirt don’t go hand in hand with supporting Black lives. I feel like Black lives are supported through the Gospel, all lives are supported through the Gospel. We all fall short of God’s glory, and at the end of the day, whoever will humble themselves and seek God and repent their sins, then we can see our mistakes and see peoples’ mistakes in a different light. See people’s evil in a different light. And that it would help bring us closer together and get past anything that’s on the surface that doesn’t really deal with the hearts of men and women.”

“I felt the stares. I felt the comments and everything that was happening. I felt the snickering,” he recalls. “But I trusted. I trusted, and God has been faithful to me.”

The Book Behind the Stand

What followed was a best-selling book, *Why I Stand*, chronicling not only that moment in the NBA bubble, but the backstory most people never saw. Isaac had struggled with deep anxiety, panic attacks, and medication dependency even while playing as the number one high school basketball player in Florida and later at Florida State University.

“I was on anxiety medication,” he shares. “I was having panic attacks on campus, you know, a few times, and I was in therapy. Just the whole nine of this. There was just this underlying anxiety that I didn’t really understand how to control.”

“People know the stand,” Isaac recalls his pastor telling him, “but they don’t know the story.” That story included personal

brokenness, a surprising elevator encounter with the pastor who would become his spiritual father, and a spiritual awakening that transformed his identity from performer to disciple.

An Elevator to Encounter

It wasn't a pulpit that introduced Isaac to discipleship—it was an elevator. "Young man, I can tell you how to be great," Dr. Hepburn told him. "You have to know Jesus."

At first, Isaac brushed it off. "I said, 'Man, I know Jesus. I'm a Christian,'" he replied. But the same man kept showing up—in the parking garage, at the front of the building, always with a calm insistence that Isaac should go deeper in faith.

Eventually, Isaac made a deal with God. "I said to him, 'Hey, if I see you one more time, I'll go to lunch with you.' Lo and behold, I see him again."

That lunch turned into a ministry relationship, and that ministry changed his life. Later, during a Thanksgiving outreach, Isaac found himself serving food alongside the woman who would become his wife, Takita. "There's a beautiful young lady standing next to me that's also serving food—who's my wife today. That's where I met her for the first time."

That moment—serving the homeless, love in the air—symbolized the transformation: from anxiety and applause addiction to selfless service and purpose.

Sneakers That Preach

After his injury in the NBA bubble, Nike decided not to re-sign Isaac. For many players, that would signal the end of a lucrative brand partnership. But Isaac, with Dr. Hepburn's encouragement, took a different route: he launched his own shoe line.

"Why don't you start your own? Why don't you make your own

sneaker?" Hepburn asked. At first, Isaac was skeptical. "I just said, 'That's not how it's done. You don't see players starting their own brands.'"

Judah 1 became the first NBA signature sneaker with a visible Bible verse as part of the design—not scribbled with a Sharpie, but embedded as a defining feature. The sneaker quickly sold out, and soon after, Isaac and his team launched *UNITUS*, a full sports apparel brand for people of faith who want to wear their values just as boldly as their style.

"We want people to honor God with every step," Isaac says, explaining the brand's mission.

Faith in the Fire

The COVID-19 pandemic brought another test. Isaac was the only player on his team who refused the vaccine, citing personal convictions and the importance of bodily autonomy. "I believe that everybody had the free choice to get vaccinated or not," he explained. "And that the people who were vaccinated didn't have to worry too much about the people that weren't."

While others folded to pressure, Isaac held firm again, reminding the public that freedom of conscience is a biblical principle worth defending.

Isaac's posture is never one of anger or attack. Instead, he calls for grace, compassion and maturity. "Truth is truth," he adds. "But you lead with love."

From Bronx to Brotherhood

Born in the Bronx to a nurse mother and McDonald's-working father, Isaac knows hardship. He remembers sleeping at the restaurant some nights because both parents worked night shifts. "There were even times that we had to sleep at the McDonald's because my dad worked a night shift, and my mom worked a night shift," he said.

After his parents divorced, he and his siblings moved to Naples, Florida, where culture shock and insecurity marked his early years. “That was the first time that I became self-aware of like, ‘Oh, I’m not necessarily what I thought I was.’”

Marriage, Ministry and Meaning

Now married with children, Isaac beams when talking about his wife. “She’s amazing. She’s a trooper.” This past April, Takita gave birth to their second child, a daughter. They bonded over early morning prayer sessions and a shared hunger for God. “I would see her, and we would have these small conversations. And over time, she just grew on me in terms of, like, just the woman of God that she was. And I saw that she took it really seriously. And I said, ‘You’re awesome.’”

Impact Beyond the Court

While Isaac continues his NBA career, he’s most moved by the testimonies of others. “They think they’re picking up this sports book about this basketball player, but they leave saying, ‘I want to follow Jesus.’” Isaac sees *UNITUS* becoming a brand that rivals Nike and Jordan in both quality and cultural reach—but with kingdom values at the core. One Jewish businessman who saw Isaac on Fox News offered him billboard space in Times Square. “He says, ‘Hey, I’m a Jewish guy. I own a billboard in Times Square, and I want to give it to you, because I just heard about your brand, and I want it to be bigger than Jordan Brand.’”

That billboard, now live, proclaims faith in God through a sneaker with Scripture.

The Legacy of a Stand

As the culture shifts, Isaac remains grounded in eternal truth. “You win in the end,” he says. “Even if it’s not easy today, even if the crowd misunderstands you, the truth wins.”

He encourages believers to take their stand—whether on a basketball court, in a boardroom, or in the quiet decisions of daily life. “Be who God created you to be,” he urges. “And trust Him with the outcome.”

At 27, Jonathan Isaac’s story is still being written. But one thing is already clear: his legacy will not be measured only in shots blocked or points scored—but in stands taken.

And in that, he stands tall.