

Meet the 9-year-old Austin-area best friends behind Microsoft's emotional viral commercial

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Gunnar Franchione and Owen Sirmons pose at the airport on their way to Vancouver to shoot the Microsoft commercial. [Contributed by Erica Sirmons]

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Gunnar Franchione, 9, listens to his best friend Owen Sirmons, 9, tell him a story at Blanco Vista Elementary in San Marcos on Dec. 13. The two are featured in a national commercial for Microsoft. Owen has Escobar Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that limits his physical movement. [LYNDA M. GONZALEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN]

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Owen Sirmons clasps his hands together as he sits by his best friend, Gunnar Franchione, at Blanco Vista Elementary in San Marcos Dec. 13. The two are featured in a national commercial for Microsoft and want to do a travel show together. [LYNDA M. GONZALEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN]

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Best friends Gunnar Franchione and Owen Sirmons, both 9, dance together at Blanco Vista Elementary in San Marcos. [LYNDA M. GONZALEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN]

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Gunnar Franchione, 9, pushes his best friend Owen Sirmons, 9, to the cafeteria for lunch time at Blanco Vista Elementary in San Marcos. [LYNDA M. GONZALEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN]

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Best friends Owen Sirmons and Gunnar Franchione, both 9, recount a story about how they met at Blanco Vista Elementary in San Marcos. [LYNDA M. GONZALEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN]

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Gunnar Franchione and Owen Sirmons during dinner out in Vancouver while they were shooting their Microsoft commercial. [Contributed by Erica Sirmons]

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By

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If you're planning to binge-watch some Christmas movies this holiday season, keep the tissues handy.

Microsoft's newest national commercial, which [debuted over Thanksgiving and has gone viral](#) thanks to its heartwarming message of inclusivity, is sure

to open up the waterworks. But even more touching than the ad itself is the deep, unwavering real-life friendship between the two Austin-area 9-year-olds who star in it.

The ad, called “Reindeer Games,” starts with a young boy sprinting through his snowy neighborhood, corralling friends with the words, “He’s gonna do it! You’ve got to see this!” As the friends gather, viewers learn they are there to cheer on a boy named Owen, who is in a wheelchair and playing Xbox with an adaptive controller. When Owen bests the game and rises from his chair to “floss” with his best friend, Gunnar, the friends explode with applause. As the commercial concludes, the following words flash on screen: “When everybody plays, we all win.”

If Owen Sirmons’ and Gunnar Franchione’s relationship feels authentic in the commercial, that’s because the two fourth-graders at Blanco Vista Elementary in San Marcos have been best friends since kindergarten, when they shared

laughs at the Play-Doh table.

“I was there and Gunnar was all like, ‘I see you here every single day,’” Owen said during an interview at the Blanco Vista Elementary library recently. “We were like, ‘Hey, let’s be best friends.’”

Owen has Escobar syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that limits his mobility and makes a wheelchair necessary for long distances. In his short life he’s had 33 corrective surgeries, including one this summer to insert rods into his spine. His mom, Erica Sirmons, said his immediate and unwavering friendship with Gunnar came as a relief.

“Gunnar is a sports guy and he plays baseball and he’s very popular,” Erica Sirmons said. “Gunnar is, in the best way, a ringleader of all these popular kids, the whole class looks up to him. Owen being so welcomed and embraced by him, the whole class welcomes and embraces him. It’s given him a better identity than the boy in the wheelchair. They don’t even see that. They’re just best friends.”

Gunnar’s mom, Rebecca Franchione, said her son came home talking about this “super cool kid” named Owen during the first week of kindergarten, adding that she didn’t learn that he was in a wheelchair until she met him months later at the class Halloween party.

“Gunnar is very protective of Owen,” Rebecca Franchione said. “Last year when they weren’t in the same class together, on the second day Gunnar refused to go to school. He sat in my garage and the principal had to come down and tell him, ‘You’re going to school.’”

They’re back in the same class together.

When Gunnar received two Xboxes for his birthday in May, he gave one to Owen, the two bonding further over a shared love of “Fortnite.” When Rebecca Franchione saw a casting call for a “Fortnite” commercial in October,

she and Erica Sirmons decided to submit the boys for consideration.

After a week's worth of Skype sessions with various executives, the boys learned they had earned spots in the commercial and flew to Vancouver with their moms to shoot the next week.

“We think they're adorable and we think their friendship is beautiful and amazing and perfect. Disability or not, to have that one best friend, someone who makes school better and life better and everything fun, that's what every person (should have),” Erica Sirmons said. “When someone else outside of you, a talent agent in L.A., is like, ‘Their friendship is something great,’ you're like, ‘I knew it!’”

Owen and Gunnar, who share everything from secret handshakes to signature dance moves, said they are getting used to posing for photos and signing autographs and are already planning a travel show called “Owen and Gunnar Take on the World.” They wore matching T-shirts promoting the show, which will focus on “food, culture and arcade games,” this week.

“We're going to have our own TV show because we've got it on a shirt,” Owen said.

“That's the first step, right?” Erica Sirmons added, laughing.

Rebecca Franchione said she's been particularly inspired by people who have opened up to her about how the commercial impacted their own lives:

“There is a local mom whose son is autistic, he's in high school here, and she came up to me and said, ‘Oh my gosh, I am so touched by your story. My son has autism and he doesn't have any friends. This gives me hope. Just one friend like your son could change everything for mine.’”

The moms agree that Owen and Gunnar have and will continue to change each other's lives for the better.

“This is what everyone should look and feel and act like,” Erica Sirmons said. “Make friends with the kids or the adults who make your heart happy, who lift you up, who are good for you, and stop focusing on any of the differences, from eyeglasses to wheelchairs to the color of your skin. These are two kids who love each other, and it makes me happy that the world gets to see it.”

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