



spencer & owen THORNHILL WAGSTAFF

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LIMBIRD

FRESHMEN SPENCER THORNHILL AND OWEN WAGSTAFF MET WHEN THEY WERE

YOUNG AND HAVE SLOWLY BECOME BEST FRIENDS

THE SNOWY HEN House doors slid shut behind Carrie Wagstaff as she walked past the fruit section.

Then she saw him – a blonde toddler, sitting in a stroller, all bundled up.

But something about him turned her glimpse into a stare.

He looked exactly like her blue-eyed brunette toddler – Owen. She walked over to the little boy's dad, tapped him on the shoulder and said,

"Hey, I've got one of those at home."

Then Wagstaff found out the boy's name – Spencer. "I couldn't pass up the opportunity to get in contact with him," Wagstaff said. "I didn't know many people in our neighborhood with Down Syndrome and I had to talk to them."

Spencer's mom, Theresa Thornhill's car idled in the Indian Hills Middle School parking lot.

It was 3:40 p.m.

She scanned the parking lot – she waited and waited and waited for Spencer to run out on one of the first days

of middle school.

"Middle school was hard for Spencer at first," Thornhill said. "It was the first time he was separated from his friends from elementary school. They weren't sure how to act around him or if they should still be friends with him, like they used to be."

But as soon as Thornhill spotted Spencer – and saw the familiar face with him – she felt her anxiety wash away.

Spencer and Owen walked out together, arms around each other, with massive smiles on their faces.

That day in the Indian Hills parking lot was far from the first time the boys had met.

After their parents met at Hen House, Spencer and Owen had participated in Variety KC's miracle league baseball games since they were seven years old and had the occasional playdate – but they had never spent seven hours a day, five days a week together.

But because of the 35 hours a week, the never-ending hallways of Indian Hills Middle School seemed less

intimidating.

"When I watch their friendship, it's like watching them put other people's needs in front of their own," Wagstaff said. "Other than family, this is the first time they've done that."

Two years later – the maroon hallways turned blue, 700 kids turned into 1,700 – and the boys became Lancers.

Owen buttoned his blue Hawaiian shirt with pink flamingos and palm trees over his signature Chiefs T-shirt he wore every day for his first high school dance.

He crawled in the back of Thornhill's car with Spencer and headed to the Link Dance.

The boys found their place in the middle of the sweaty mosh pit filled with hundreds of their fellow freshmen and Link Crew leaders.

Spencer and Owen showcased their unforgettable dance moves – even the DJ got a

picture of them to put on his website.

No matter where the boys were in the humed cafeteria, they received fist bumps, got asked over and over again to be in pictures and were photographed by The Houtberk and Harbinger photographers all night.

Boom.

The loud noises of bowling balls hit the wooden ramp and cheers from his team filled Owen's ears at the first Unified Bowling game of the season. These noises that typically bothered Owen, were just background noise. His eyes shifted back and forth between his lane and Spencer's constantly.

He made sure Spencer always knew when his turn was, even if that meant someone had to make sure Owen knew when his own was.

If Spencer didn't have the best game, Owen was the first person to give him a high five and make sure he was okay; he was the first person to bring Spencer his water bottle and make sure he had his

favorite Cheez-Its.

"I would've never dreamt Owen could be so concerned about someone's needs," Wagstaff said. "They are in this huge bowling lane with the most overstimulating distractions, and all he cared about was someone else's well being."

With just one year down at SM East, Spencer and Owen have a family here.

Pictures of Spencer striking a peace sign filled junior social skills cadets Clara Peters and Naomi Kincock's phones – the album grows every class period they spend with him.

Owen stops in his tracks whenever he sees Elio the therapy dog – even though he wishes she would retire so his dog Bella could take her place.

When Spencer walks into his social skills classroom every morning, the first thing he does is his "boo-yah cashaw" handshake with special education teacher Tia Hurt before he even puts his backpack down.

And Owen is always playing basketball with the social

skills cadets in the gym with an ear-to-ear smile.

But no matter how many new friends the boys have made this year – constant dance parties, trying out new trick shots from "Dude Perfect" and bowling at Ward Parkway Lanes, isn't the same with anyone else.

"Their friendship is pure and genuine," Hurt said. "They have walked through so many stages of life together and I almost envy that. Not many people get to have that experience."

"They don't judge people," Thornhill said. "I think that's why a lot of the general population gravitates towards them. It doesn't matter what you look like or if you have money or if you wear designer clothes, they love everybody. They love people for who they are. As they've gotten older, kids have outgrown them and that's normal. But they've found each other and connected and it is such a blessing."