

It wasn't exactly love at first sight.

Or second sight.

Or third.

In fact, John Ferlisi might even use the word "dislike" to describe how he felt about Candace Atkins when he met her for the first time at the St. Louis-area middle school they both attended.

But who ever really marries their middle-school sweethearts? Relationships at this age are never more serious than the pretend marriage games that kids play, where on a whim, you're married to someone, only to be divorced and married again to someone new before the last bell dismisses you from school. These childhood shenanigans are as ever-changing as St. Louis weather, where one day it's scorching hot, and the next, well, freezing cold.

John just needed a few years to warm up to Candace.

About four, to be exact.

While working on a mutual friend's homecoming float in the fall of 2001, a spark flew that warmed up everything. One homecoming dance later and the rest is pretty much history.

John left to pursue a computer science degree at Missouri State. In addition to being a full-time student, he works as a student web designer for the university while also holding down a job as a stock boy for a grocery store chain in Springfield, Missouri.

Candace lives in St. Louis, where she is studying interpreting for the Deaf, to work with Deaf actors. She works for an electrical company as well as being the youth director at St. Mark's Lutheran Church. In her spare time she is found working on theatre productions at the Terry M. Fisher Theatre on the campus of Florissant Valley Community College.

Distance, computers, sign language and work can't seem to get between these two. Since officially becoming a couple during their senior year in high school, they've maintained a strong long-

distance relationship despite being tugged in so many different directions.

“These theatre productions that I’m involved with, they take so much time and effort to get these shows to go off without a hitch,” Candace said. “It’s so tiring, but it’s all worth it in the end.”

It was definitely all worth it when Showtune, Candace’s last show, wrapped up production in October 2006. This particular show came with a different type of hitch... the one that comes with a diamond ring.

Just minutes earlier, Candace was on stage, looking awestruck as a fellow cast member sang, trying to win her love: “I promise you a happy ending like the one you’ve been dreaming out,” he sang. “So if you’ve had a bad beginning, love will come out winning as the sea runs out. And when you find it rough contending with the grime the world puts us through, I can promise you a happy ending.”

John watched the performance from the crowd, a bundle of nerves. Not one for speeches, especially ones likely to set the stage for the rest of his life, he had one of his own to give. But how was it going to measure up to the poetry just sung on stage?

This is the unique story of their engagement through her eyes

If I could stop crying this picture could finally be taken. This was the thought blazing through my brain with a mix of happiness, and a feeling of being totally overwhelmed by the surprise of all surprises in my life, and he did it on stage!!!!

But I am getting ahead of myself.

John kept his proposal such a secret that he didn’t even ask my mother’s permission until she arrived at the theatre. The cast knew by intermission, but I was clueless putting on lipstick and hairspray for the second act.

After the show had finished, my stage manager, called me to the stage so the technicians could check a light. “The show is over. Nobody cares about the lights now, I said. Just then I heard behind me, “I care.” John was standing on stage. He walked up , grabbed

my hands and then said words I can't forget, "I love you, I've always loved you, I want to love you the rest of my life." Just then we heard a yell from the green room and as I turned to look John got down on one knee, opened the box and asked, "Will you marry me?"

Judging by her reaction of excessive tears of joy (and a lot of smeared makeup from the show), his speech measured up just fine, if not better. Her overwhelming "yes" response to his speech was real, not acted.

He stood up and slipped the ring on my now trembling finger and as he hugged me I just lost it. Everything was perfect; I thought this could only happen to someone else. As I looked up, the cast and crew of Showtune, our families and friends were all around us cheering. They had been watching the whole thing on a close circuit monitor in the Green Room. Oh, and that yell we heard was my friend David shouting, "Get down on one knee already!"

Here was her happy ending. And his, too.