

How Love Began

In your backyard or in the anatomy lab, you never know where you'll meet "the one." Seven Bergenites recall those fateful first encounters.





Loreen and Joe Ulrich, Cresskill

“In 1986, the night before I met my husband, I went on a date with someone else in New York City. I’d spent that night at my childhood home in Northvale, and was awakened early the next morning by the sound of chainsaws. I wearily got up, threw on jeans and a T-shirt and went into the backyard with my hair a mess, no makeup and barefoot. That’s when I met Joe, a cute, dark-haired, muscular guy walking out of the wooded area in my parents’ backyard. He was 26 at the time (I was 28) and was working for the tree company that my parents had hired. We talked briefly, and I left shortly after to return to my apartment in New Brunswick. Later that day, my mom called to tell me that she set me up with the tree guy. She gave him her number because she wasn’t sure if she should give mine out, and a few days later he finally called. We got married in 1990 and have two children, Morgan and Devon. I always tell people that you’ll find your soulmate when you least expect it, because I found mine in my own backyard!” —Loreen

Jenn and Bo Yang, Hillsdale

“What are the chances of a guy born in China and a girl born in New Jersey being soulmates? In the summer of 2000, when I was 18, I was talking to a friend via Instant Messenger on dial-up AOL. I happened to see the AOL welcome dialog box mention “Love At AOL.” I rolled my eyes and thought, ‘Who could ever find someone through the internet?’ Well, I clicked on the box that led me through a rabbit hole of profiles, and eventually I ended up on a separate website. Lo and behold, I found Bo’s profile and thought he was cute. I quickly sent the picture to my friend and she agreed. She also dared me to Instant Message him—and I did! Instant Messaging eventually led to phone calls. But since this was before cell phones, we would both buy calling cards so we could talk to each other every night. Many times, we’d use all the minutes and he’d have to run out to the corner store to buy another card! After many hours of talking on the phone, we finally decided to meet. He came all the way from Queens to North Jersey, where I was living at the time, and we met in Braddock Park, where we spent six hours together. We maintained a long-distance relationship all four years I was in college at Rutgers–New Brunswick, and we got engaged two years after I graduated. We have faced many challenges and losses, but here we are, 22 years later with four beautiful boys. It’s not always easy, but it’s been so worth it. I truly found my soulmate and best friend and I can’t imagine living this life with anyone else.” —Jenn



Jennifer and Michael Miano, Waldwick

“Back in 1990, my cousin Mia decided that her friend Michael and I would be a perfect couple, so she began the process of putting us in the same place at the same time so we could meet. I was 16 and lived in New Milford; she was turning 17 and lived in Mount Vernon, N.Y. Mia invited me to her house for the weekend for her birthday, and Michael was among the friends she invited over to help prepare for the party. Apparently, she had tried on three or four other occasions to get us together, but it never panned out. Mia didn’t tell either of us that she had been trying to set us up until almost a year after we started dating, because she didn’t want that to influence our relationship. While setting up for her party, we met, connected and fell madly in love—and we got married in 1996. We were just 22 and 23 at the time, which felt so old then, but looking back we realize that we were so young! Now, 32 years after we first met, we have three children and we live in Waldwick. Michael and I continue to be each other’s best friend, biggest fan and lifetime love. I am forever grateful that Mia knew we were meant to be. I can’t imagine my life any other way.” —Jennifer



Samantha and Adrian Jachens, Wyckoff

“We met in 2004 at age 22 in Newark during our first week of Rutgers Medical School. I noticed Samantha in the anatomy lab and approached her. In a room full of smelly dissected cadavers, we found an immediate connection. I went on to uncharacteristically but boldly invite myself to her birthday party that weekend. Shortly after, we started dating, and we studied together every single day in medical school for the next four years. We went on to pursue different specialties—she trained in dermatology and I in ophthalmology—but always dreamed of opening a joint practice together. During residency we lived in New York City, got engaged and married right before we graduated. We moved to Dallas for a year for my fellowship and then moved back to New Jersey to create our lasting home, where we now live with our son, Carter, and daughter, Juliana. We’ve spent the last decade working for separate private practices but will be finally realizing our med-school dream in 2023 when our multi-specialty practice opens. Just like we spent every day in medical school studying together, we’ll be spending every day working together, in professions we love with the person we love most in this world.” —Adrian

Cortney Steffens Malandra and Anthony Malandra, Midland Park

“It all started with a fateful dinner out to celebrate June birthdays in 2009. Anthony was coaxed into participating in a 5K race (he was not a runner at the time) by a mutual friend. He relaxed and showed up to my school district’s race (I am a teacher), which was a fundraiser. We both ran the race on a hot June day, and then my colleague introduced us. We were both a sweaty mess but we had a connection right away. We spent the rest of the morning together as I took pictures of my students running the kids’ race. We said good-bye and my colleague said to me, ‘So, can I give him your number?’ I agreed and then waited three whole weeks to hear from him—it took that long for my friend to pass on my number! We found out while dating that we both grew up in the same town in Rockland County, N.Y., but never knew each other because of our eight-year age gap, and later found out we had both grown up in a house number ‘23,’ as well as other coincidences. We’ve been married for seven years and have a 6-year-old daughter, Emily.”—Cortney



{ LOVE STORIES }



Annette and Robert Hartman, Oradell

“On October 20, 1976, Bob and I met at No Place Inn in Bogota. He had just returned from a Florida vacation, so, needless to say, he looked amazing with his nice tan. I wrote my name and number on a coaster and on my way out, I put it in his jacket pocket. He never called. The following week, we both were at No Place again, and we started talking; I realized he never called because he was too shy. We had our first date that week and discovered we had a lot in common, like that we both loved the outdoors. In October 1978, we got engaged as he loaded a picnic basket into the trunk of his car. ‘So, you want to get married?’ ‘If you’re asking me to marry you, the answer is yes!’ We got married in September of 1979 and recently celebrated our 43-year anniversary. We have three children, twin sons and a daughter, and now own a Park Model RV and a seasonal campsite, where we can share the love of outdoors with our children and grandchildren. Oh, and Bob still carries my coaster. We are both retired now, and I know the best times are yet to come.” —Annette



Kayla and Benjy Harris, Emerson

“My husband Benjy and I met in 2009 when we were both 18 at Rutgers University. We lived in the same dorm and our resident assistant (RA) was urging us to make friends. My friend and I decided to go into each room to say hello. We started at the end of the hall with my husband’s room and were in there for three hours. Needless to say, we never made it to another room. He was listening to my favorite band, Blink-182, and we had an instant connection. We were opposites in a lot of ways; I liked to go out to college parties every weekend and Benjy liked to stay in and play video games. Even though we were different, we had a lot of fun together and became best friends. We started dating in December of 2009. Many people didn’t think we would last because of our differences, but we became interested in each other’s hobbies. We got married in 2016 and had our daughter Noelle in 2018. We just celebrated 13 years together and are still best friends.” —Kayla

As told to Haley Longman