

## How romantic! Couple famous after proposal

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As proposals go, the engagement of **Robert Gray Jr.** and **Keisha Williams** was a breathtaking affair: an eight-hour surprise journey for the bride-to-be through 10 rooms and suites at the Buckhead Ritz-Carlton, each room filled with dozens of roses, dozens of candles, gospel music and scores of family and friends praying for the couple and wishing them well.

At journey's end there was a "yes," a kiss and a splendid diamond ring. A photographer took copious pictures the whole way through.

That was in April. Then, a few weeks ago, Atlanta photographer Ross Oscar Knight posted the photos in a slide show on his Web site and blog. Now, more than 100 million hits later, the couple's private, bended-knee, will-you-marry-me has become a Web phenomenon.

The link to the slide show has gone from friend to stranger, hit MySpace and all-things-bridal Web sites like The Knot. Blog entries have become testimonials about the restorative power of true love. 20th Century Fox has expressed interest in the story, as have radio stations and magazines, Knight says. And the rumor mill has been churning, offering up speculation about who the couple really are, and whether the whole thing was a hoax or just too over the top.

Over the top, perhaps. But it wasn't feigned. **Gray**, 28, is a CPA for General Electric. **Williams**, 29, works in public affairs at Kaiser Permanente. They are indeed real and live in Atlanta. And they say that night was never intended to be made so public.

"People don't believe us when we say our intention was never to share something so intimate and personal with the world," said **Williams**. But from the moment the photographer Knight posted it as a sample of his work -- something the couple agreed to -- "our life has been chaos," **Williams** said.

### Not love at first sight

Such a fate seemed unlikely when the couple met in December 2003. They had arrived at the same time for a surprise birthday party for **Gray's** friend Gavon Harris. As **Williams** struggled to wrest balloons and party favors from her car, **Gray** acknowledged her with a nod of his head and kept right on walking. By the end of the night she thought he was a loser. He thought she was stuck up -- but pretty.

On Valentines Day 2004, **Williams** got a bunch of roses with an anonymous note: "Wishing the best for you always." A month later, at a dinner hosted by mutual friends, **Gray** asked **Williams** if she'd liked her flowers. How did he know she got roses? "Because I sent them," he replied.

They talked every day afterward, and by last September they were talking marriage but agreed they'd wait until the time felt right. What **Williams** didn't realize was that the time felt right to **Gray**. During the next several months, in a small journal, **Gray** secretly began designing his proposal. He drew on his Christian faith to come up with his vision: a version of Solomon's golden temple as described in the Old Testament, filled with candles, roses, and the prayers of their parents and

50 family members and friends. Then he used his experience as an accountant to figure out how to pay for it all.

How much did he spend? **Gray** won't say.

"I'm tight with my money," he said. "But **Keisha** deserved nothing less."

Still, during his secret preparations, "There would be times she'd want to know why we couldn't go out to dinner or go do something and I wanted to turn around and say, 'Because I'm broke!'"

### **Roses and gold**

He shared his plan with his parents, who've been married for 36 years. **Robert Gray Sr.** said his son presented him with a color-coded, minute-by-minute outline of how the evening would run. "I said, '**Robert**, now this is a production, but since God gave you the vision you are obligated to follow through with it,'" the elder **Gray** said.

That took some doing. **Gray**, for instance, brought his father along as he looked for hotels. He didn't want anyone to mistake him for a drug dealer or rapper, or question his ability to pay. To throw **Williams** off, **Gray** chose for the proposal date April 28, her brother's birthday, when her family would be celebrating anyway. Then he enlisted his friends, instructing his male friends not to say anything to their wives or girlfriends.

"None of his boys teased him about it; instead it was, 'Oh, my God, I can't wait!'" said buddy Will Johnson, who was charged with keeping alive 400 roses **Gray** had flown in from South Africa for the proposal night. "It was inspiring."

### **The big moment**

When April 28 came, **Williams'** brother Terrence drove her to the Buckhead Ritz under the pretense that they were on their way to a formal birthday dinner.

As **Williams** stepped into the lobby, the hem of her white gown tickling the floor, she saw **Gray** coming toward her in a tuxedo. Her journey through 10 rooms and an evening filled with flowers, candlelight and prayer began.

By the time she reached the proposal room heavy with the scent of red and white roses and glowing with candlelight, "the breath literally left my body," she recalled. She understood why **Gray** had been so often absent in the weeks leading up to the night.

All was captured by photographer Knight. It took the three of them two months of sorting through 1,000 photos to come up with a slide show. The couple e-mailed it only to those who attended the engagement and to the friends and family who had missed it, about 65 people, and then let Knight post it on his site.

The e-mails and phone calls started almost immediately. Knight heard from his Web host that his site was crashing its server. Strangers approached **Gray** and **Williams** at Starbucks and Zaxby's. The sudden attention was frightening.

"It got to the point that we didn't want to leave our houses because people would stop us and point and say, 'Rob and **Keisha**!' Or they'd be hitting their cellphones saying, 'They're here, come quick,'" said **Williams**.

### **Hope floats**

But their discomfort in the spotlight has been mitigated by the number of people who have told them that their faith in love has been restored by the couple's engagement.

Shalonda Jones, 37, of Merriville, Ind., doesn't know **Williams** and **Gray**. An analyst with an Internet company, she has never been married. In a telephone interview, she said she wept watching the couple's slide show, then e-mailed the link to 38 friends with this note:

"Definitely share this with all of your single friends. This is what someone should be willing to go through for someone he is serious about and loves ... and I get the question all the time why am I still single ... I think this video explains exactly why ... anyone that loves you should be willing to love you on this level. This brother ... is serious ... no games ... no frills ... and he involved God in every single step of the process."

For his part, **Gray** said he's heard from men who say he has set the bar for proposing far too high, and that their girlfriends want the same treatment.

As for a wedding date? **Gray** and **Williams** say they haven't gotten to that yet. They're still trying to absorb all that has happened, to figure out why their proposal has caused so many to swoon. Gavon Harris, the man who helped introduce them, has his ideas.

"It's not Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, it's not J-Lo and Ben Affleck," he said. "It's an everyday, average man on a journey to fulfill a vision because he loves a woman. It's a modern-day love story -- and everybody wants to believe in love."

#### **A NOT-SO-MODEST PROPOSAL**

Some numbers from **Robert Gray Jr.**'s proposal to **Keisha Williams**:

10 hotel rooms

50 friends and family members

400 red and white roses

300 votive candles

12 24-carat gold-dipped roses

2 bottles of champagne

8 hours to complete the proposal and after-party

102,000,000 Web hits and counting