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Teri Atkinson in action.

It's not just California dreamin': two West Coast classes for kids prove that bridge appeals to all ages.

By Paul Linxwiler

The median age of the ACBL membership is 66. While this sobering statistic evokes a sense of gloom among some members, it serves as a challenge to others to teach the game to a new generation of players. Plenty of excellent bridge teachers and programs exist in North America to achieve this goal, but two bridge classes in California are examples of some that are focusing their efforts on the opposite end of the age spectrum.

"They're just babies," said Teri Atkinson of Bakersfield CA, referring to the 17 second- and

third-graders she teaches at Bessie Owen Primary School. Atkinson is a retired educator (she's been both a teacher and a principal). She got into bridge instruction after attending a Teacher Accreditation Program (TAP) at the Phoenix NABC.

In Temecula CA — some 50 miles north of the San Diego area — Nancy Schramm was recruited by Red Hawk Elementary School teacher Vicki Beatty to teach a bridge class for 33 children aged 8 to 11.

Schramm is a retired executive with Avon, where she hired and trained managers and presented

seminars. She found her job skills to be useful in teaching bridge to children. "You have to be positive and organized to handle a group this large," she said.

Atkinson and Schramm represent a segment of the teaching community that is deliberately taking the game to young players in their schools.

Atkinson said, "When I decided to go into school bridge, I went all the way." Her dedication to teaching was sparked by a TAP class presented by Betty Starzec.

"I was so impressed and excited, I was five feet off the ground," said Atkinson. "I couldn't wait to get started."

In January 2003, she began teaching a one-hour class every Friday after school.

"The kids loved it so much that they *all* showed up every week."

The school principal provided a room for the children to play, and Atkinson found tables that were suitable for children to use. In another effort to make the game more accessible to the kids, Atkinson obtained card holders for each of the players.

"Their hands aren't big enough yet to comfortably hold 13 cards," she said.

The children proved to be fast learners (typical for a magnet school), quickly mastering the bid boxes and learning all of the necessary vocabulary of the game within a few weeks. Their favorite word: kibitz.

Schramm taught her class twice a week before school as part of Red Hawk's GATE (Gifted And Talented Education) program. With the help of Beatty, Schramm took the students through ACBL's

Student Teaching Series.

"I found that in teaching young people to play bridge, analogies are extremely helpful," said Schramm. "When some of the boys would complain about defending ('I don't like to let the other team play the hand.'). I tried to use football as an example for them.

"Who won last year's Super Bowl?" I asked.

'Tampa Bay,' they instantly replied.

'And what part of the game is Tampa Bay best known for?' I continued.

'Defense!' they said. After that, they had no complaints about defending."

Despite their enthusiasm, Atkinson and Schramm are quick to point out that teaching — especially to children — is a lot of work.

"It really helps if there's a teacher in the school who can help," said Schramm. "A class of 33 students is a lot, and now more schools want to start a program. The problem is getting other people to help."

Atkinson agrees.

"I'm teaching this group next year as

well, and we're expanding into three other schools. The only thing holding me back is finding others to teach. I love doing this, but it's hard work," she said.

Neither Atkinson nor Schramm is getting paid for her efforts. The experience of teaching in schools, however, has helped them in setting up classes for adults as well. Both women are recruiting adult players successfully, but their focus remains school bridge.

Atkinson said, "The assistance and material provided by ACBL have been first-rate. And I'm really proud of our local unit (514) and

district (22) as well for purchasing textbooks for the kids."

Schramm's success has even attracted the attention of local newspapers, which have sent reporters to visit her class to write stories.

She said, "A reporter once asked one of my boys whether he would rather play bridge or play a video game at home. I thought 'What a dirty question!' to myself, but this kid thought for a moment and chose bridge. When the reporter asked him why, he said, 'Because you can't play video games with your friends.'

"What a great answer!" □



Students and teachers from the Red Hawk Elementary School's bridge program.

The debate: are Junior programs worth the effort?

Why would anyone question the value of teaching bridge to Juniors? The answer is brutally simple: money.

It's a problem that organized bridge faces from the national to the local level throughout North America and elsewhere in the world. Should programs be funded to attract young players to the game, or should organizations focus on where the money is: retirees?

"Only a very few of the children you teach in this type of setting will move on to tournament bridge later in life," said Bill Wood, a former District 22 president, a longtime member of various unit boards in Southern California and an avid supporter of Junior programs, including the one in Temecula.

"But," he added, "you have to start somewhere."

No one argues that introducing young people to the game creates a long-term potential for growth, but for

organizations searching for new members — who will pay dues and buy entries — enthusiasm for Junior programs is often tempered by fiscal realities.

The median age of the ACBL membership has remained relatively constant for many years. The reason for this is that a new crop of recent retirees joins the organization every year, creating an influx of members in their mid-sixties. Fears that the organization will soon die of attrition are exaggerated, but the need for younger talent is undeniable.

The strategy of going after recent retirees may be financially sound, but others are determined to change what has been a constant in ACBL's demographic makeup by targeting Juniors.

"The potential is so tremendous I think it's worth it," said Wood. □