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Young hands on deck

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If you want to be a millionaire, you've got to play like one.

That's the theory driving 32 Atlanta eighth-graders to an unlikely place --- the bridge table.

In early August, six of them will go as far as Omaha, Neb., to meet the Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise of bridge: billionaires Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, who joined forces to provide a total of \$1 million to schools to teach kids to play the card game.

In the polished gym at the private, tony Westminster Schools recently, students leaned elbows on folding tables, their cards fanned like peacocks in front of them.

Six weeks ago, Erica Wilson, 12, had never heard of bridge. Christal Mack, 13, didn't like math. And as far as cards went, all 12-year-old Charles Best knew how to play was Go Fish.

That was before they joined Odyssey Atlanta, an academic enrichment program that is being held at Westminster this summer for kids who attend low-performing schools.

"I think everyone should learn to play bridge," said Terrence Houseworth, 12, before he turned to Erica.

"I'm going to shut your spades down," he announced. Erica tucked her plastic jelly sandals under her chair and didn't flinch.

Many consider bridge, long the game of the upper crust and the aging, "a sort of a dying entity," said Steve Hancock, a veteran bridge player and the middle school director at Odyssey.

When he first considered introducing bridge to Odyssey kids, he was the only one --- student or teacher --- who could play. The average bridge player is white and 51 years old and makes \$61,500 a year, according to the American Contract Bridge League.

But Hancock said he believes in bridge as a teaching tool. "This looks like school, it feels like school, but it's cooler than school," he said of the organized card game sessions in the gym, part of the Odyssey program, which also offers more conventional lessons in math and reading.

Along with Buffett and Gates, Hancock has joined a small but growing nationwide venture to bring the youngest generation to the bridge table.

He's found that among the Odyssey kids, bridge is suddenly hot.

The eighth-graders here have a daily 45-minute period to hone their card skills. But Hancock whips out his camera phone --- look, here's a video of students playing on the bus. They play at lunch. Online. At home.

Christal, the math-averse student and an aspiring pastry chef, said she's now "begged" her 16-year-old sister to learn the game.

Bridge intimidated Charles, an eighth-grader at Inman Middle, when Hancock first explained it. "It was confusing," he said.

But then he won Odyssey's first bridge tournament. And the next. Now he plays online an hour or two each day, under the name "Lego_knight_baseball."

"I like that it's a complicated game and deals with a lot of math," he said. Because he plays with a partner, the game taught him to communicate. "I used to not be able to do that," he said.

Last year, the American Contract Bridge League launched www.bridgeiscool.com, a Web site targeted at players younger than 26.

Also that year, Jenny Ryman and Gavin Wolpert, both in their early 20s, became the youngest pair ever to win the Blue Ribbon Championship, considered the most challenging pairs bridge competition in North America.

And since January, Atlanta Junior Bridge Inc. has taught the game free to more than 150 kids, some as young as 6.

In bridge, two teams of two people --- labeled "North and South" and "East and West" because they sit at a table like the four points of a compass --- attempt to take a certain number of tricks, or groupings of cards. Pairs bid on the number of tricks they think they will take during play. Point counting and accurate partner responses play important parts in helping the team make its bid.

"It's a very analytical game," said Odyssey executive director M.J. Thorne. "It requires mental agility, picking up on nonverbal cues, social etiquette, thinking ahead [and] a lot of math. All skills needed to be successful in life."

And unlike high school football, PlayStation or gymnastics, all expensive hobbies, anyone can afford to play.

"You just need a deck of cards," said Patty Tucker, president of Atlanta Junior Bridge.

As faculty adviser for the Westminster Schools' bridge club during the year, Hancock watched the bridge bug bite Westminster students, who would spend their Friday afternoons at school around card tables. So he introduced the game as part of the eighth-grade curriculum at Odyssey.

"There are people who say urban city kids have no use for bridge. But we've seen them gain skills from chess [and] ballroom dancing," Hancock said, alluding to Antonio Banderas' 2006 film "Take the Lead," in which the actor's character uses dance to motivate a group of teens. "Why not bridge?" he asked.

He managed to find some high-powered allies in Gates and Buffett, bridge addicts who play online as "T-bone" and "Chalengr," respectively. Buffett recently told talk show host Charlie Rose he'd pay \$5 million a year just to play --- that's how much he loves the game.

The duo offered \$1 million to schools willing to introduce the card game.

A few schools turned up their noses at the idea of cards in the classroom. But Hancock jumped at the opportunity.

The cards going around the tables on the manicured Westminster campus come from the billionaire pair, as do the tables and other supplies.

Odyssey's top players, Charles and Christal among them, will head to Omaha's regional bridge tournament the first week of August, where they will play in a mini-tournament.

They'll also watch more experienced gamers scramble for points in an attempt to become "Life Masters," the bridge equivalent of a karate black belt. And oh, yeah, there's that lunch with Gates and Buffett.

Charles doesn't know what he'll say to the billionaires. But he does know that when he gets home, he'll continue playing bridge online with his friend Mookie, another Odyssey kid.

"That's the one thing kids keep asking," said Tucker, whose organization plans to find more sites to teach bridge. "They ask, 'Where can I continue to play? What's next?'"

A LOOK AT BRIDGE

> There are many versions of the game's history. According to the U.S. Bridge Federation, it originated as the game whist in 16th century England. Whist evolved into various bridge-like games with names such as triumph, trump, ruff, slam, and whisk and swabbers, all popular with the upper classes in western Europe and North America.

> The name "bridge" comes from the Russian "biritch," meaning "call," because players call out their bids.

> When given a choice of companions on a deserted island, 42.3 percent of bridge players chose "three other people for bridge" over their other options: Tom Hanks (18.9 percent), Betty Crocker (15.1 percent), Jacques Cousteau (14.5 percent) and "Dr. Phil" McGraw (9.2 percent), according to a 2005 American Contract Bridge League survey.