

Is There Such a Thing as a Bridge Gene?

A Conversation with Kris Pernicano

By Jessica Dee Rohm

Jessica: *Kris, let's start at the beginning. When did bridge first come into your life?*

Kris: It was 1969. Something big had just happened—something deeper than my alligator bite, and yes, I've had one. This one, though, changed the course of my life. My mother, Dorinda West, was a regular at her local bridge club in Orange County. One day, a man named Robleigh Lindvall walked in. He needed a partner, and my mom's regular partner was ill. They hit it off instantly. "Perfect fit," doesn't only apply to bridge [hands](#).



Kris Pernicano & mom Dorinda West

J: *That sounds like a turning point.*

K: It really was. Not long after, my mom and dad's marriage ended. Robleigh and my mom, now Dorinda Lindvall, moved us to San Diego, where he ran a major plumbing company—Safeway Plumbing

and Heating—with 26 union plumbers. They chose a home in La Jolla for my sister Cheryl and me. But honestly, it felt like just the two of us living there—Robleigh and my mom were always out playing bridge.

J: *Did your mom ever try to get you interested in bridge?*

K: Oh yes, she'd suggest it often. She said I'd love it. I wasn't so sure. Sometimes we'd meet up with other bridge families. The parents would go off into one room, lost in their game, while us kids were left to form our own little support group—we called ourselves the "bridge orphans."

J: *That's a hilarious and endearing name.*

K: It stuck. And through the years, I came to appreciate the joy bridge brought my mom and Robleigh. They built lasting friendships—all through bridge. It really was their life, and a good one.

J: *What about your own family life?*

K: I married a kind, hard-working man named John Pernicano. He ran his dad's restaurant—Pernicano's in Pacific Beach—for 60 years. We raised our daughters, Laura and Lisa, in La Jolla.

J: *When did you decide to give bridge a try?*

K: When Laura and Lisa were at Birdrock Elementary, I took lessons from Ed Layton, one of my mom's bridge friends, at the Riford Center. He was hilarious and brilliant. He'd say things like, "You need a permission slip from your mom to bid five diamonds or five clubs!" We played once a week with a group of fun women. We didn't keep score—we played for lottery tickets! That went on for 15 years until one of us moved away.

J: *Lottery tickets? Did anyone win? You really made it your own.*

K: Yes, but life threw us a curve in 2009. My stepdad Robleigh got cancer. Eventually, he couldn't leave the house. They lived just four doors away, so I visited every day. The three of us developed a three-player bridge format using a "mystery

dummy” hand. Whoever won the bid got to play against the other two. We did this for hours each day—it actually worked surprisingly well.

J: *That’s a beautiful memory. Was there a turning point when you re-entered the bridge community?*

K: Yes, that same year, a national bridge tournament came to town. My mom told me I had to play. I protested, “Who would I play with? My friends don’t play anymore!” She just said, “Show up.” So I did. They found me a partner in the novice room—Betty Black. It was my first time using a bidding box, and we did well.

J: *Did your mom find out how you did?*

K: Oh, she did! I walked into one of the advanced rooms to find her, and she and her partner, Alice Lane, started giggling. They’d heard my name on the intercom among the winners.

J: *What happened after that?*

K: Life happened—family needs, responsibilities. Bridge went on hold. Fast forward to 2023: my mom’s health declined. Her vision failed, so she couldn’t play bridge anymore. Laura and I visited daily. We played “Hand and Foot” instead—it was easier on her eyes. But she missed bridge terribly. She kept telling me to go back and become a “Life Master.”

J: *And did you listen?*

K: I tried. I could barely remember the rules. I found Scott Farr’s classes at the La Jolla Community Center. I joined his intermediate group. He was fantastic and even threw in some stand-up comedy. Then I discovered the beginner Duplicate Game at Redwood Bridge Club in Balboa Park. It was perfect—a great entry point for duplicate bridge. David Walters runs it and is incredibly supportive. If you don’t have a partner, he’ll find one for you.

J: *What kept you coming back?*

K: Duplicate bridge is fascinating. You get to analyze hands afterward, think about how each could have been played better. Scott even invited me to play at La Jolla Cove Bridge Club. I was nervous. He bid “1 No Trump,” and I passed like a deer in headlights. He still made overtricks. Later, he paired me with someone named Jessica—he thought we’d be a great team. We are.

(Yes, readers, that Jessica and I are one and the same. And Kris and I are a perfect fit.)

J: *Was your mom still able to follow your progress?*

K: Yes. Every visit, I shared my bridge stories. She lit up with each one. One time, Laura and I brought our pet lizard Lizzy to see her. My mom smiled and said, “I feel sorry for Lizzy—she’s probably going to become a bridge orphan.”

J: *When did your mom pass?*

K: April 6, 2024. She was full of love, grace, and



John Pernicano ??

wisdom. She always said, “It is nice to be important, but it is important to be nice.” I miss her every day. Whenever I win I suspect it is her hand guiding me.

J: *Any full-circle moments since then?*

K: I recently bumped into one of the original bridge orphans. We had a laugh. I told her I’m now playing bridge seriously. She said, “Oh no, you’ve joined the dark side. I’ll pray for you!”

J: *That’s perfect.*

K: I told her, “Our parents knew what they were doing. They found a great thing.” And you know what? My mom was right. I love bridge. I always will. She passed the torch to me—and I just hope I don’t drop it. ♣