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Tugba Basaran

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Ambiguity of borders continues
By Jerry Malec

As a resident of Berlin when the wall came down in 1989, Western Michigan University alumna Dr. Tugba Basaran has witnessed the impact of shifting borders and has dedicated her career to fostering international cooperation and development.

Now a lecturer at the University of Kent’s Brussels School of International Studies, Basaran is a regularly invited expert to speak on issues related to security, development and borders. Apart from her academic work, Basaran has 10 years of professional experience in international cooperation and development, and has worked for international organizations, research institutes, and as an international project manager in Latin America, the Caribbean, Southeast Europe and Asia.

Rewind to November 1989 in West Berlin when Basaran was in high school and the Berlin Wall came down. She recalled what the climate was like a few days before the big event. “Nobody really knew what was going on—we were expecting something to happen at that time, but we weren’t expecting the wall to come down,” Basaran said.

“Everybody came to West Berlin (from East Berlin), the streets were filled—it was a huge celebration that lasted for days, though it took a while for what was really happening to sink in. Then, the next morning I went to school and there was a French exam—the teacher didn’t even cancel it.”

In 1991, Basaran enrolled in Freie Universität Berlin, where she would study until earning a master’s degree in 1996. Midway through her degree program, she took a leap and applied for a scholarship exchange program offered by Freie Universität Berlin, which had partnerships with 17 institutions in the United States, including one with WMU.

“WMU was next to Stanford, on the same list; I applied to WMU, got accepted and moved to Kalamazoo in fall 1993,” said Basaran, who majored in political science. “I got lucky, and it was a fantastic opportunity. The professors were highly committed to their craft and reached out to students. The classes I had were very interesting and challenging academically. I was impressed by the commitment of the professors to make us think, but also to motivate us.”

Though her time at WMU was short, Basaran spent one year studying at WMU and remembers how well the faculty cared for her as a foreigner living in the U.S.; she said that made her feel extremely welcome. “I had multiple invitations from my professors to join their families for Thanksgiving and for Christmas,” she said. “They weren’t just taking care of me in the classroom, but they were also taking care of me outside of the classroom by integrating me into the festive seasons. It was just amazing!”
Sometimes this work involved standing with one foot on each side of a border, as was the case when Basaran helped launch an independent micro-finance bank in the divided city of Mitrovica, catering to both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs. It was the only institution in the country that served both sides of the conflict from one location with one united work force. “Doing something like that, you learn a lot about society and how it functions,” said Basaran, who jumped at the chance to assist in the rebuilding of a war-torn region. “Everybody knew there was a conflict so they wouldn’t cross the bridge, but they would come to the bank on top of the bridge. You’re limited in how much you can learn visiting a country as a tourist; things are just not the same unless you actually live in that particular country.”

While working in Kosovo in 2000, Basaran met her husband, David Kruijff, a native of the Netherlands, who was also working in micro finance. She followed up that work by returning to school at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom to earn a Ph.D. in international studies, which she achieved in 2008. She was hired shortly thereafter for her current position as an assistant professor at the University of Kent. “It’s nice to be able to share with my students my practical experience, as well as my research,” said Basaran. “I want them to think critically, to question what we take for granted and to find their own position. I have found that the more you learn about different countries and different cultures, the more you get interested, and the more you want to venture out there, explore, and see for yourself.”

In the five years Basaran has been at the University of Kent, she has authored a book, “Security, Law, and Borders” (Routledge 2010) and published various articles. She also organized the European International Studies Association’s Ph.D. summer schools and various workshops. Basaran is the director of postgraduate research (responsible for doctoral students), director of the M.A. in international development and a fellow at university research centers in Brussels and Paris. Additionally, she is a member of the editorial board for the journal, “Cultures & Conflicts.”