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.”

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!”

Though her time at WMU was short, Basaran made a positive impression on her professors, especially Dr. Jim Butterfield, professor and director of graduate studies in
the Department of Political Science. “Tugba was a very active and lively participant in
the seminar she took with me,” said Butterfield, who had Basaran as a student in his
variable topics course focused on the themes of nationalism and ethnicity. “Due to her
international background, she was very sensitive to issues of identity and difference.
I’ve followed her career in the interim and we even met once when we were both in
Prague to catch up. We still communicate after all this time and I’m very pleased to see
her thrive as a scholar and teacher.”

Basaran returned to Freie Universität Berlin
in 1994, and another incredible opportu-
nity presented itself: a chance to serve as an
intern at the United Nations in New York.
After she completed her master’s degree she
worked in micro-finance in El Salvador,
Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti and the Philippines.
“I learned a lot about different countries,
cultures, situations, how people behave and
how economies function,” she said. “In
particular, I learned how informal econo-
 mies in a post-conflict environment support
development, which is something that you
can’t find easily in text books.”

Sometimes this work involved standing with
one foot on each side of a border, as was the
case when Basaran helped launch an inde-
pendent 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 loca-
tion 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 coun-
try 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 direc-
tor 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.”