Closing Distances

By: Asli Tavasli
Interviewee: Merve Nur Kursav

We often learn about great mathematicians through lectures, conferences, and news articles, but their influence rarely announces itself so formally. More often, it arrives quietly, in fleeting, human moments. As a freshman newly arrived from Turkey, I was wandering campus when a sound cut through the unfamiliar air: Turkish, unmistakable and alive. Before I could think, my feet were already moving. I rushed toward the voice and blurted out, breathless, "Oh my god, hello! Are you Turkish?"

The person I ran toward wasn't another undergraduate, but a professor: Dr. Merve Kursav. She smiled with ease, asked my name, and listened attentively as I stumbled through my introduction. That evening, I called my parents and told them about her, surprised by how quickly a place so foreign had offered me something that felt like home. Whenever I think of Merve, my mind returns to that first encounter—to the softness in her voice and the assurance she offered a stranger. Beyond her kindness, I remember equating her presence with what was possible for a Turkish woman like me here.

Merve's journey, too, began far from Dartmouth. She grew up in Turkey. She taught herself English and mathematics. Her greatest inspiration was her father, who believed deeply in education. He saved diligently to buy mathematics textbooks in English so his children could reach beyond the limits of their classrooms. At that time, this required extraordinary dedication. "Thanks to him," she recounts, "mathematics was never something unreachable. It was something you worked toward."

That persistence carried her into college, where she pursued mathematics with resolve. She later became a Fulbright Scholar, following an academic path that demanded endurance. As she reflects, she had come from "the bosom of Anatolia"[1], had never traveled outside Turkey, yet sensed a horizon wider than her circumstances. At the University of Georgia, she studied mathematics education, situating her love for mathematics within questions of teaching, learning, and equity.

When I ask her why mathematics education—why not pursue mathematics in its purest form—she pauses, then answers with the same calm I remember from that first day. She tells me loving mathematics was "never enough"; she needed to understand "who had access to that love, and who was quietly pushed away." Growing up, she had seen "brilliance scattered everywhere": among classmates, neighbors, and children whose curiosity was unmistakable—but also how easily that brilliance could be dimmed by circumstance. So, she chose mathematics education as a way to remain close to the subject she loved while widening the circle of those who accessed it. In doing so, she transformed a private act of belief, first modeled by her father, into a public and systemic commitment.

In many ways, her work is about closing distances: between students and mathematics, between effort and belonging, between curiosity and opportunity. That work, ironically, required her to travel far herself. This became especially visible to her after a devastating earthquake tore through southeast Turkey in 2023, causing loss of approximately 60,000 people and leveling entire towns. From abroad, Merve carried that loss, connected to home by phone calls and news alerts.

Though she has built a life across the world, her family remains far away. She describes her parents' emotions as bittersweet: a deep pride intertwined with longing. When I ask her what she finds most difficult about adapting to life in the United States, she doesn't mention visas, long flights, or cultural adjustments. Instead, she reflects, "It's seeing new wrinkles on your mom's face, more gray in your

dad's hair, and realizing time moves on without you—especially when a 7.8 earthquake unfolds half a world away."

Merve's impact on me reaches far beyond our shared background. When I joined her for faculty lunch freshman year, our conversation drifted toward questions of purpose and direction. As a biology major, I told her I was drawn to the complexity of living systems but unsettled by the monotony of endless hours spent pipetting samples in the lab. Half-joking, I admitted that I envied "math-smart" people like her, for whom mathematics seemed effortless.

Merve invited me to think differently. She spoke about the inevitable overlap between biology and mathematics, describing math as a language for making sense of biological complexity. More importantly, she challenged my belief that mathematical ability is innate. Mathematics, she explained, was "less about talent and more about a willingness to sit with uncertainty." Struggle, she emphasized, "is not evidence of inadequacy it's evidence of learning." Before we parted, she urged me to explore freely during college. It was her confidence in me that led me to step into classrooms I had once assumed were closed to me.

Merve holds a non-mainstream view of mathematics education: she rejects the idea that mathematics is universal, arguing instead that it's "deeply local, shaped by culture, language, and lived experience." Though I initially resisted this idea, I came to recognize myself as evidence of her claim. We were both raised in the same education system dominated by multiple-choice exams, where success meant speed and circling the only correct answer. Rather than reinforcing that model, she offered an alternative. She invited me to work through tasks developed from her research, problems designed without a single correct entry point. For the first time, mathematics asked me how I was thinking, not how fast I could answer. With initiatives such as the CPM Educational Program, the Connected Mathematics Project, and DIFUSE, Merve works to dismantle boundaries many students like me unknowingly face, shaped by early experiences and discouraging grades. By helping teachers design instruction that values student thinking and welcomes multiple approaches, she challenges narrow definitions of mathematical success and expands access and opportunity across K–16 education.

To me, Merve still represents possibility, as she did freshman fall, but now I see her not through what we share, but through what she has built. Her greatest impact lies not only in her research or titles, but in the confidence she cultivates in others. Her biography continues to be written through the students she mentors: through the paths we take, the confidence we claim, and the questions we dare to ask because of her.

As I finish this essay, an email notification from her appears on my screen, filled with problems to think through.

[1] Turkish idiom denoting Turkey's rural and traditional heartland.