



Jul 09, 2008 [Homepage](#)



[News National](#)

- News
- ▶ National
- Diplomacy
- Politics
- World
- Business
- Interviews
- Columnists
- Op-Ed
- Arts & Culture
- Expat Zone
- Features
- Travel
- Leisure
- Life
- Cartoons
- Weird But True
- Sports
- Health Briefs
- Turkish Press Review
- Today's think tanks

Turkish-Armenian professor arranges in conference in Kayseri

Hamparsum Bozdoğan, a Turkish-Armenian doyen in the science of statistics, has arranged an international conference in Kayseri as a way of showing his gratitude to the city he left when he was 8 years old. What follows is his extraordinary life.



The Bozdoğan siblings are pictured here with their mother (center), who lived in Istanbul until she passed away at the age of 94.

"I still see Turkey as my actual country. I have expressed my love for my country on every platform and have helped Turkish students in the US. Additionally, I arranged the Kayseri conference as a way of showing thanks."

Professor Bozdoğan often volunteers as an educational envoy and frequently visits Turkey, the country he left 50 years ago to go to the US and get an education. He lectures on statistics at the University of Tennessee. Professor Bozdoğan, the fifth child of a middle class family, is a professor famous for formulas he developed, formulas now named after him.

His love for Turkey has led him to arrange international conferences in Turkey, to never turn down invitations from Turkish universities and to help students who have come from Turkey to the US to study. The "International Data Mining Conference," held on June 19 in Kayseri, was the latest conference he organized. We spoke with Professor Bozdoğan about his childhood memories, the US and Turkish-Armenian relations, about which he is hopeful.

Father served in army

Bozdoğan was born in a one-room apartment in Kayseri's Atpazarı district in 1945. His family is originally from Felahiye, another district of Kayseri. Meline, his sister, taught him how to read and write when he was only 3 years old. He was to receive a good education, his whole family agreed; however, his father, Bedros Bozdoğan, known as "Brick Maker Sgt. Ahmet" was keen on taking his son to the brick kiln during the summer when school was out in order to show his son the hardships of working and to gain self-confidence. His mother, Heyna (also known as Henna), reluctantly agreed. "My father used to make bricks for the army to be used in train stations during World War II. During the time I lived in Kayseri, he used to wake me up early in the morning and take me to the kiln. He showed me the difficulties of working and encouraged

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me to study. He asked me to keep track of accounts and gave me a small amount of money when there was a famine in the country and we had ration books. I developed self-confidence in that brick kiln. This confidence brought me success in academia. That is why I have always been grateful to my father, who died in 1981 at the age of 74." Two of Bozdoğan's siblings now live in the US and three in İstanbul's Bakırköy district.

'Patriarch's deputy changed my life'

Bozdoğan did not disappoint his family when he began classes at Kayseri İstiklal Elementary School. He became the brightest student as he already knew how to read and write. A visit by a deputy of the patriarch to Kayseri when Bozdoğan was in third grade changed the course of his life. "My teachers often came and told my parents to send me to school for more education since I was quite successful at school. One day I heard that one of the assistants of Armenian Patriarch Karekin Khachadourian was in Kayseri. Successful Armenian children were in those times being taken to İstanbul for further schooling. I went to the Armenian Church with my brother, Kirkor [Şahin], who was a student at the Talas American College then, to see the patriarch's deputy. Upon seeing my report card he immediately registered me for İstanbul Karagözyan Armenian Elementary School without asking a single question. However, at the beginning my family did not want me to go to İstanbul alone as I was just 8 years old. I cried for a week when I heard that some of my friends were also going to İstanbul. In the end, I persuaded them with my brother and then left for İstanbul."

Professor Bozdoğan continued his education at Karagözyan Armenian Elementary School from fourth grade on. He learned Armenian as a second language and French thanks to his teacher Mari Sarafyan, a graduate of the Sorbonne, during this period. Then he went to Feriköy Secondary School and the Atatürk High School for boys. He successfully completed these schools and received scholarships. During this period, the Bozdoğan family, with four girls and two boys, moved to İstanbul. Their longing for their son was at this point unbearable. "I left Kayseri with grief just like a soldier when I was 8. Then my family came to İstanbul to end this bitter grief," Bozdoğan says.

Having completed his high school education in 1964, Bozdoğan looked for ways of going to the US to pursue a higher education where his brother, seven years older than him, was studying. He found a way and soon began his education at the University of Wisconsin's department of mathematics. He received his undergraduate degree in 1970, supported by the Kalust Güşbenkian fund. Having completed his university education, he started his graduate studies at the University of Illinois's department of mathematics. He was nominated for the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) NATO Science Scholarship, but accepted the assistantship his department offered.

Turkish-American student association chair

After receiving his Ph.D. in multivariate statistical modeling, Professor Bozdoğan continued his career in statistics at the University of Virginia. While an associate professor he decided to move to Tokyo with his family to work with Japanese Professor Hirotugu Akaike and lived there for a year. "Actually, I wanted to study medicine; however, medical school was too costly for me since I completed my education with scholarships. Now, I engage in statistics and the problems I handle reach out to the field of medicine. For instances, the formulas we have put forward are being used in the calculation of cancerous cells," Bozdoğan says. During his years at the University of Wisconsin, he saw students coming from Turkey experienced problems adapting -- not unlike himself. To help with this, he took on the presidency of the Turkish Students Association at the university, whose main purpose was to help students coming from Turkey, following the completion of his graduate studies in 1970. He held the presidency of this association for two years and took on roles in similar projects in the following years. Professor Bozdoğan always supports Turkish students studying in the US in addition to helping those who study in the same field in Turkey. Eylem Deniz Akıncı, an assistant professor at the Mimar Sinan University of Fine Arts, is one of the academics he helped complete her doctorate. Akıncı says: "He contributed significantly to my doctorate thesis. I am also going to have the chance to continue my post-doctoral studies at the University of Tennessee with the scholarship I won thanks to the letter of invitation Professor Bozdoğan sent me. The conference he organized in Kayseri is also of great importance. A number of scientists came to Turkey and are working on joint projects."

Two fellow townsmen meet on a train

Professor Bozdođan decided to organize the international conference after an interesting coincidence. He met Kayseri Mayor Mehmet Özhaseki while traveling to the Italian city of Brixen for a conference. After a warm chat about Kayseri, the mayor suggested he put together an international conference in Kayseri and said that he would support such an endeavor. Bozdođan then started working on this project from that time on and his efforts bore fruit three years later. "I lived in the US for many years but I have never forgotten Kayseri and Turkey. I have always wanted to work on projects that would be beneficial for my country. That is why this conference is meaningful for me. It is an opportunity for me to show my gratitude to my hometown. Who would have guessed that such a conference would be held upon the meeting of two fellow townsmen on a train?" Bozdođan says.

In 2006 Bozdođan visited Kayseri for the first time since leaving 50 years ago. He went to the neighborhood and house where he spent his childhood and found his childhood friend Şadan Dođan. "It was a great pleasure for me to find my childhood friend after 50 years. We spoke about the days we spent together during the three days we met. I look forward to seeing him again this summer." Professor Bozdođan also had the opportunity to visit his high school in İstanbul. "I entered my classroom, sat on my chair 45 years since last sitting on it... It took me back to those days."

Apart from his life story and academic field, we also asked Professor Bozdođan about the future of Turkish-Armenian relations. He begins by noting that neither he nor his family were exposed to ill-treatment during the time they lived in Turkey. "We never faced any problems. On the contrary, we were well liked at school and in the neighborhood. I am hopeful about Turkish-Armenian relations. Although the two countries have completely dissimilar ideas, a way for peace can be found. The leaders should come together and work to find a solution. New generations should grow up with seeds of peace. I am longing for those days. Otherwise, history will never forgive either side."

Professor Bozdođan has published nine books and over 50 articles. He continues to lecture at the University of Tennessee. He is planning on starting up M.A. and Ph.D. programs in the field of statistics and data mining in Turkey. He says he will continue to support Turkish students, though he does not plan to return to Turkey.

Kayseri Mayor Mehmet Özhaseki: We will continue cooperating with our professor

"I met Professor Bozdođan while traveling on a train. My friends and I were reading books and seeing the books, his wife understood that we were Turks. She then came to our compartment with her husband. 'Merhaba,' he said to us. We chatted for a while and I told him I was the mayor of Kayseri. He spoke warmly about Turkey and Kayseri. His family is a well-known family in Kayseri. We kept in contact since our meeting on that train, and I introduced him to several academics from Kayseri as he is also a well-known academic. We will continue to cooperate with Professor Bozdođan. I am glad to have met one of my friendly fellow townsmen," Özhaseki says.

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