

Jeff Around Town – May 27th, 2025

Jeff: Time for another edition of Jeff Around Town. I'm here with Dr. Meral Koldaş. Who, you're originally from Turkey. You went off to the UK, and now you're here in Omaha at the Munroe Meyer Institute at UNMC, and your specialty is in autism.

Meral: Yes.

Jeff: You've been interested in studying autism and helping others since 2009?

Meral: 2008.

Jeff: 2008. And do you want to tell us a little bit about your work in autism?

Meral: Sure, let me take you a journey that begins in Turkey, where I graduated from a special education program with a strong focus on supporting individuals with autism. During my undergraduate years, I volunteered as an educator, working with children with autism, a home-based program to support and develop their communication skills. After graduation, I worked as a special education teacher in several rural areas in Turkey and supported both caregivers and children with autism as well. So, working in these under-resourced communities opened my eyes to challenges that caregivers and educators face. Limited access to the services, a shortage of trained professionals, and pressing needs for practical and sustainable teaching strategies.

Jeff: To help people, and you're mostly working with kids at that point?

Meral: Yes. Yes. Yes. So, that experience planted a seed in me, a desire to find ways to support more families, educators, especially under-served areas.

Jeff: And so, at what point were you learning English?

Meral: Yes.

Jeff: You went off to the UK.

Meral: Yes. So, I took a leave and moved to the UK.

Jeff: Specifically to learn English, or to get better at helping others with autism, or both?

Meral: Both, because before I moved to the UK, I started learning English, but if it is not educated at that time. And then when I moved to London, I continued learning English. And then after that, I pursued my master's degree in North Wales.

Jeff: Okay.

Meral: Then after finishing my master's degree, I moved to Northern Ireland to complete my PhD at Queen's University of Belfast. After earning my PhD, I moved to the United States, where now I serve as a post-doctorate research fellow.

Jeff: Was there some culture shock?

Meral: (laughter) A little bit, yes. London first, then Northern Ireland, because Irish people are completely different, and lovely. I love them so much. They are my favorite. And then here, it's like even the weather and everything is different.

Jeff: It's very different.

Meral: Yes, yes.

Jeff: So, what are you exactly doing right now at Munroe Meyer Institute?

Meral: At the moment, I'm working with children with autism, providing some supervision to therapists working, directly working with autism. I'm conducting some research.

Jeff: Meral, it's been great having you on Jeff Around Town. Any final thoughts on your time in Nebraska?

Meral: You know Belfast, Northern Ireland, it is very cloudy, rainy.

Jeff: Oh, sure.

Meral: And then moving to Omaha was a great change for me, because we have sunshine. It's lovely for me, because it is similar to where I live in Turkey.

Jeff: Okay. But January and February wasn't like where you live.

Meral: Oh, don't talk about that.

Jeff: Just forget about that.

Meral: Yes. And also, the people in Omaha, since I moved, it's like random people, they just help me. But they are helping me sincerely. And I love this.

Jeff: That's great. Meral, thanks for being on Jeff Around Town.

Meral: Thank you so much for inviting me. Thank you.