A Democratic Steering Committee led by Senator Hillary Clinton may seem an unlikely breeding ground for a Regent student, but that’s just where Kéren Dongo ’06 (Government) was working when she chanced upon the university’s graduate degree program in government.

“I was online, scrolling through graduate schools, and I was attracted to Regent’s program,” she says. “I was fascinated by the courses that were offered, so I sent my application. I honestly didn’t think about it again until I received a call from the admissions department.”

Regent was the only graduate school Dongo applied to. “It was the curriculum that drew me,” she emphasizes. “I didn’t realize it was a Christian school until later. I was so focused on the curriculum that everything else fell into the background. But when I took a closer look, I realized the principles of the school were Christian. I grew up Christian, so it didn’t seem out of place for me.

Dongo has never chosen schools casually. She chose the University of Michigan because her brother was there. “My family is Haitian,” she says. “I’m the youngest and the only girl, so my parents were more comfortable with me going where there was family. In the Haitian culture, if the eldest is doing something positive, you fall in line and follow that positive example.”

Her life has been one of following—and setting—positive examples. The daughter of a pastor, she grew up in a tight-knit Haitian community with three older brothers. American-born members of the Haitian community who are fluent in English often advocate for others
who can’t speak English. “From a very young age, my brothers and I would translate for my parents, people in the church and others in the community,” says Dongo. “Whenever anyone had an issue—as small as not understanding their light bill or as crucial as school children trying to understand their teachers—we’d translate and help them understand what the bill collector or the teacher was saying.”

Those instances instilled a love of helping people that has informed Dongo’s choices throughout her life. “Helping people is what I know how to do,” she says. “Coupled with my love of politics, it’s led me to where I am today.”

The love of politics comes from her father. Dongo describes a childhood tradition: she and her father would watch the 6 o’clock news together every night. “As a kid, your imagination is always going,” she reflects. “I felt like I was going around the world with Peter Jennings, when he’d talk about Russia, the Cold War and governments in other countries.”

Watching with her father, Dongo developed a thirst for public policy—wanting to know more, to understand more.

It was that thirst that ultimately led her to Regent. By the time she was accepted, she was working for John Kerry’s presidential campaign, doing field outreach to the Haitian community in Miami. She left immediately for Virginia Beach.

Was she concerned about attending a conservative university? “It’s certainly fair to say that I was more liberal than my fellow students,” she admits, “and I never hid the fact that I’m a Democrat. But it’s equally true that the professors at the Robertson School of Government are absolutely genuine in their appreciation of my honesty and respectful of my political beliefs.” In fact, Dongo credits her professors with helping her strengthen those beliefs: “I had to defend them verbally and in writing,” she recalls, “and my professors encouraged substantive discussions in class. By the end of the term, we all had a healthy respect for each other. That was an integral part of my education at Regent.”

There was an unintended but lovely consequence of her Regent education: a friend in the business program introduced her (via email) to a Nigerian who had posed some questions about American politics. “This friend forwarded the questions to me. I answered them, and we began to communicate regularly. We talked about what good government means and how stable governments impact people’s lives.” When they finally met, “we literally just fell in love”—earning her a degree and a husband in the bargain!

“At the end of the day, we all want to see America better. When you come from a third-world country, or experience a different form of government, you have a real appreciation for the U.S. You don’t take it for granted.”

Before assuming her current position as political outreach director of the coordinated campaign for senatorial candidate Mark Warner, she worked for Congressman Bobby Scott in Hampton Roads, and for a grassroots organization committed to building the power of low-income people for racial and economic justice in Northern Virginia. “These were wonderful learning experiences, where I was able to put into practice the good skills and academic foundation I received from the Robertson School of Government,” she says, “and I learned more about the politics of our government and how to effect positive change in people’s lives.”

A typical day doesn’t exist. Each morning, she calls political outreach coordinators all across the state and sets goals for the day. Her own goal is to ensure that people who want to be connected to the campaign have that opportunity. “The campaign isn’t about a person, it’s about people,” she stresses. “I’m always looking at the big picture—have we reached out to seniors? To Hispanic Americans? African Americans? Have we spoken to the leadership in churches and civic organizations? Do they know the issues and where we stand?”

Sometimes it’s speaking with elected officials; sometimes it’s a breakfast, a luncheon and a community event—all in the same day. Though the work is exhaustive, it’s not onerous. “There’s a great team on the coordinated campaign,” she says. “Everybody is dedicated. It’s not a burden, because it’s shared.”

She remains philosophical about politics. “At the end of the day, we all want to see America better. When you come from a third-world country, or experience a different form of government, you have a real appreciation for the U.S. You don’t take it for granted,” she says. Dongo speaks from experience: she and her family watched as an aunt in Haiti lost a home that she’d worked a lifetime for. The government simply took the house, the land and all her possessions with no explanation and no recompense.

Like the rest of America, Dongo is anticipating November 4, but says she hasn’t given much thought to the day after. “I really don’t think about it. I’m focused on Democratic victories.” When pressed, she says she’d happily work for Senator Warner if he wins, but “I’ll cross that bridge in November.”

What about her own political aspirations? With the precision timing of a seasoned campaigner, she says, “I’m not sitting here dying to run for office, because I see the strain it puts on the candidates—but I’m not ruling it out … because you never know.”