

The Susan G. Komen Foundation and their decisions regarding Planned Parenthood

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The Board had been mulling the decision for a while. In the spring of 2011, a three-member subcommittee was formed to examine the funding of one particular grantee. That solitary recipient represented a small piece of a huge pie, less than one percent of the hundred million dollars given each year to clinics and research around the country. Percentages aside, this grantee and the choice therein were hardly insignificant. The subcommittee's work would have to navigate choppy political, social, and even religious waters. They would work with staff members from various departments to examine very closely what money went where. Whether this was the beginning of a broader reexamination of the granting process, or a political ploy, would be the source of intense public debate in the weeks and months that followed. When news was announced about the fate of that relatively small grant, months after that sub-committee was formed, one thing grew crystal clear: whether the goal had been avoiding or accommodating political pressure, political pressure had arrived in spades.

The Susan G. Komen Foundation

The Komen Society started with a promise made by Nancy Brinker to her dying sister. When Susan Komen died at the age of 36 of breast cancer, Brinker made it her mission to raise awareness about the illness and to fight it. Brinker had the relationships necessary for immediate financial success. Her husband invented the salad bar, a quirky innovation that led to great wealth. Through country club lunches and social events, Brinker had access to the networks of big city money – much of which was linked to oil – that could help give her personal cause national attention and momentum. Fundraiser lunches turned into walks. Those walks grew into weekend events. From the inception of Komen in 1982, it quickly spanned the country. Today, Komen has affiliates in over 100 U.S. cities, hundreds of thousands of volunteers, and over a million walkers annually. They have official sponsors as big as Ford, American Airlines, General Mills, and GE. Those affiliates, walkers, volunteers, and sponsors have generated close to \$2 billion to help fight breast cancer, and in 2011 Komen reported revenue of \$347 million.

In their mission to “eradicate breast cancer as a life-threatening disease by advancing research, education, screening, and treatment,” Komen has been successful for a number of reasons. They have mastered the art of “cause marketing.” Their pink ribbons paved the way for pink baseball bats, pink

yogurt caps, pink stamps on the tops of raw eggs, and as controversially as it was lucrative, pink buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken. All that pink on all those products are the result of partnerships profitable for Komen and beneficial for the organizations that attach their name to the cause. Komen's success as a non-profit, and the scope of their support network, stem from the universality of their mission and the problem they confront. Cancer knows no political affiliation, picks its victims blindly and with no consideration of demographics. Komen was able to tap universal support for their mission to eradicate breast cancer.

Brinker oversaw all elements of Komen's early growth. Though her personal political leanings and private campaign donations skewed conservative, she made alliances of all political sorts. Her relationships in Washington with members of the media grew quickly, and she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barack Obama in 2009. This award from a democratic president illustrates her bi-partisan ability, as she'd left Komen in 2002 to serve as an Ambassador to Hungary for President George W. Bush and then his Chief of Protocol until the end of his second term in January 2009. The experience of lobbying and dining with global leaders was a heady one, and some at Komen claimed that Brinker returned from that experience a changed woman. There were also practical problems of reintegrating a leader who'd been gone. The organization had continued to progress under the watchful eyes of the Board, many of whom had been with Komen since the organization's founding. They were ill-equipped to confront tensions that arose upon the return of this figurehead after an extended absence.

Planned Parenthood

If Susan G. Komen had been for years a paragon of bipartisan, apolitical work, then Planned Parenthood was perhaps the opposite. Planned Parenthood's mission is to provide health services – many of which pertain to reproductive health – to low-income women. Among those are contraceptive services, treatment and testing for STDs, and uterine and breast cancer screening. Planned Parenthood screened three quarters of a million women for Breast Cancer in 2010, referring out to oncological specialists as needed. As part of their model, Planned Parenthood paid for those referrals. In all, they provided about three million women with medical services in 2011.¹ Large portions of the money that pays for those services comes from government sources.

¹ <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/who-we-are/planned-parenthood-glance-5552.htm>

Opposition to government spending hardly explains the significant political pressure Komen felt to cut their funding of Planned Parenthood. Surely not such a small portion of the Federal Budget occupied as much attention as Planned Parenthood, which was less than one percent.² The source of that pressure derives predominately from Planned Parenthood's status as a provider of abortions, the largest provider in the nation³, making it perhaps the most polarizing organization in the United States today. In 2010, when Planned Parenthood was testing all those women for breast cancer and providing contraceptive services, they also provided 329,000 abortions.⁴ That particular dimension of their services attracts the continual ire of pro-life (also known as anti-abortion) factions of the political sphere. It also implicates Komen—to some pro-lifers— as providing tacit consent to an immoral act.

Opposition to abortion providers is hardly a new phenomenon. The issue of abortion and choice is a sticky one about which people have widely divergent, though usually passionate, opinions. It is not the sort of subject that an organization seeking charitable donations would be keen on invoking or addressing.

In short: the mission of Planned Parenthood is by no means as universally endorsed as that of Komen. So, that Komen sub-committee had to determine just how much support of Planned Parenthood would cost their organization. It was easy to make a case both ways. From one perspective, Planned Parenthood is on the frontlines of healthcare for poor women. One of Komen's central tenants is frequent and early screenings, since cancer caught earlier is cancer more easily defeated. By this logic, grant money to Planned Parenthood surely saves lives and fits Komen's mission. On the other hand, Parenthood educates and refers out. Arguments against the grants would therefore be rooted in the efficiency of those dollars spent. Could the \$700,000 granted to Planned Parenthood annually be better used by clinics specifically devoted to cancer screenings and treatment? Would it be better spent on research to actually work towards a cure? Moreover, was a backlash for the one particular grant going to harm the broader revenue streams for Komen?

Religious Tensions in America

In the year 2005, the Catholic bishops of South Carolina announced very publically that they were pulling out of a Komen fundraiser to protest the charity's affiliation with Planned Parenthood.

² <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/03/14/democrats-jump-on-romney-for-vowing-to-end-funding-for-planned-parenthood/>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/douthat-the-medias-blinders-on-abortion.html>

⁴ <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/planned-parenthood-did-one-abortion-every-95-seconds-many-one-year-live-cincinnati>

Similar troubles soon arose in the Arkansas dioceses. Ever adept at building partisan bridges for a non-partisan cause, Nancy Brinker subtly quieted the controversy. In fact, in 2008 the Pope blessed a basket of pink ribbons as Brinker greeted him on the tarmac on behalf of President Bush. That gesture belied problems that continued to brew. In a political climate increasingly polarized, Komen faced mounting animosity for their alliance with Planned Parenthood. By January of 2011, that Papal endorsement was a distant memory, and eleven Ohio bishops in charge of Ohio's 2.6 million Catholics instituted a policy forbidding donations to Komen from church affiliated organizations. Evangelicals joined in the denunciation. Previously focused largely on abortion providers, websites such as CareNet.com and Bound4Life.com grew more and more vehement in criticism of Komen as a proxy. Some of those organizations went so far as to label the pink Bibles put out in a fundraiser "Bibles for abortion."

Komen felt these shifts in public sentiment and felt justifiably unsettled by them. They had previously stood their ground when facing similar pressure. In her 2010 autobiography, *Promise Me*, Brinker defended grants to Planned Parenthood as supplying,

"breast health counseling, screening, and treatments to rural women, poor women, Native American women, many women of color who were underserved - if served at all - in areas where Planned Parenthood facilities were often the only infrastructure available."

But, that courage was in the face of losing one sponsor, a workout / gym organization for women named *Curves*, specifically because of Komen's support of Planned Parenthood. This pressure was coming from something much bigger. Approximately three quarters of the citizens in the United States would call themselves Christian, and almost a quarter of all Americans are Catholic. For an organization like Komen, dependent upon public perception and broad financial support, such a significant contingent demanded attention. When your stakeholders include every possible donor, and when a quarter of those possible donors are members of an organization at odds with one particular grant recipient, what is to be done?

The tenor between religious conservatives and governmental agencies reached a fevered pitch when a provision of President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act mandated that organizations such as Catholic hospitals and universities provide insurance packages that cover employees' contraception and birth control services. Komen had to discern whether maintaining the grant to Planned Parenthood made

them complicit in, and vulnerable to, these cultural and religious wedge issues. They had navigated this tension before. But, was the climate changing too greatly for continued success at diplomacy?

Komen's Grants Structure

The Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure is Komen's signature fundraising event, which takes place in 150 locations on 5 continents, with over 1.7 million annual participants as of 2010. In Komen's franchise-like model, affiliates operate as independently incorporated nonprofits but must abide by the national group's policies. In the United States, 75 percent of funds raised from the Race stays in local communities for affiliates to disperse as they see fit. The remaining amount goes to the national Komen organization where it is used to fund scientific grants and research; Komen's research grants total nearly \$755 million, making them the largest non-government funder of breast cancer research. Grants dispersed beyond the scope of research, called community health grants, are distributed at both the national and affiliate level. These grants help fund breast cancer education, screening and treatment projects. Last year, Komen for the Cure Affiliates—working in conjunction with local organizations—awarded more than \$93 million in needs-based community grants.

On a national level, Komen provides grants to over 2,000 community organizations, which are overseen by the Community Health Programs department. At the time of these debates about grant recipients, that department head was Mollie Williams. As Managing Director of Community Health programs, Williams was responsible for directing both distribution and selection of community grants. A seasoned public health professional, one of her primary roles was to direct program evaluation and performance measurement efforts to demonstrate the impact of grant making and other programs.

In a December 16, 2011 internal memo to Komen affiliates, President Elizabeth Thompson announced the national office's decision regarding new evaluation criteria for grant recipients. She stated that a new policy would be going into effect on January 1, 2012 to allow Komen to "*build a more systematic way to measure our impact, better leverage national programs across the organization for greater efficiencies, and more effectively evaluate grant applications and assess risk prior to an investment.*"⁵ She explained that this decision came after a yearlong effort to review their overall grants

⁵ <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/02/an-inside-look-at-susan-g-komen-for-the-cures-spin-machine/252488/>

criteria, process and performance standard. It was, “*part of our broader effort to strengthen our grant-making process.*”⁶

Thompson went on to explain the implications of the change in policy for grants. A Komen grant could be terminated if a grantee loses their tax-exempt status, is barred from receiving state or federal funding, or is under investigation for any administrative or financial improprieties at a local, state or federal level. To the third point, while grant eligibility is lost while the grantee is under investigation, it can be reinstated once the investigation is complete and the organization is found clear of any wrongdoing.

The memo from Komen’s president to its affiliates went on to acknowledge that the new policy would have an immediate impact on existing grants:

“Please be aware that these new criteria will affect any number of organizations, including perhaps some that have been longtime partners. We are already aware of several, a hospital in one community, as well as all Planned Parenthood Chapters. Planned Parenthood has been a longstanding partner with Komen in a number of communities. Currently, however, various authorities at both the state and federal levels are conducting investigations...⁷ Under these new criteria, Planned Parenthood will be ineligible to receive new funding from Komen until these investigations are complete and these issues are resolved.”

On the day of the memo, Thompson called Planned Parenthood President Cecile Richards to inform her of the policy change. Though the decision was made at the national office, relationships with Planned Parenthood ran deep at both the affiliate and national level. Komen affiliates were directed to take any questions regarding the policy change to their local Affiliate Relationship Manager. Meanwhile, any media requests regarding this topic were to be directed to the national communications team based at Komen’s headquarters in Dallas. While grant awards were typically chosen at both national and local levels, this decision came from Dallas.

Three Days in February

On January 31, 2012, the Associated Press broke the news that Susan G. Komen had adopted new grant policies that barred Planned Parenthood from receiving funding. A Komen spokesperson explained that the new policy doesn’t allow funding to groups under government investigation, citing

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Coincidentally, just a few months earlier, Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations for the House Energy and Commerce Committee, had announced that he was launching a Congressional investigation into whether Planned Parenthood illegally used federal funds for abortions.

Rep. Stearn's probe in Congress. The news of Komen's decision spread like wildfire via traditional and online media outlets.

Social media erupted with individuals and organizations expressing support for both Komen and Planned Parenthood. But a majority of the (louder) voices stood in Planned Parenthood's corner. The hashtags #StandwithPP and #PlannedParenthoodSavedMe quickly circulated with the appeal for donors to support Planned Parenthood in light of Komen's decision. Celebrities from the worlds of music, film and politics rallied for Planned Parenthood. NYC mayor Michael Bloomberg pledged to match up to \$250,000 in support of the Planned Parenthood. Some Komen affiliates even took to Facebook and Twitter to express their disagreement with the national office's decision and their intention to keep funding the local chapters of Planned Parenthood.⁸ Specifically the chapters in Orange County and the statewide Connecticut chapter rebuffed the decision and "shared the outpouring of frustration."⁹

On February 1st, Komen Founder and CEO Nancy Brinker released a statement via the organization's website and Facebook page stating, "*our granting process have been widely mischaracterized.*"¹⁰ She cited trust and responsibility to donors as the motivation behind the reevaluation of their Komen's granting criteria, and refuted claims that politics were a factor. This was Komen's first official statement on the uproar.

On February 2nd, Karen Handel, Komen's SVP of Public Policy, re-tweeted a message via Twitter that said "*Just like a pro-abortion group to turn a cancer orgs decision into a political bomb to throw. Cry me a freaking river.*" While the tweet was quickly deleted, a screenshot was captured and posted on a left-leaning political blog MoveOn.org that elicited over 600 comments. Growing sentiment held that Handel—a former Republican gubernatorial candidate from Georgia tasked with leading Komen's public policy efforts—had driven Komen's decision to defund Planned Parenthood. Media quickly linked Handel's hiring in 2011, which had gone largely unnoticed, and the timing of this announcement, deducing from the chronology political machinations. Intense criticism eventually led Komen to abandon its early policy of silence.

⁸ <http://www.facebook.com/komenct/posts/10150607091557491>

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ <http://ww5.komen.org/KomenNewsArticle.aspx?id=19327354133>

On February 2nd, correspondent Andrea Mitchell, a long-time Komen supporter, interviewed Brinker on MSNBC.¹¹ Mitchell quoted a statement by Handel from July 2010, prior to her joining the staff of Komen, where she affirmed her pro-life stance and opposition to Planned Parenthood. Brinker said that Handel was not involved in the granting decision, and insisted that the choice was made at the Board level with a commitment to Komen's mission as the motivating factor. During the Mitchell interview, Brinker introduced a new issue that influenced the granting decision: a shift to direct-service providers. She cited Planned Parenthood's role as a pass-through agency that recommends screenings for clients without actually performing the procedures.

Brinker's claim that Planned Parenthood wasn't directly eradicating breast cancer rang familiar, considering criticism about the percentage of Komen's budget that goes to actually finding a cure for Breast Cancer. In 2005, Komen awarded about \$53 million in grants. This represented about 26 percent of total expenditures. In 2010, that percentage had shrunk to 17.4.¹² The decline and paltry ratios look even worse when compared to the 43 percent that Komen spent in 2011 on "education." Critics have asked—how many reminders do women need to get screened? Does the western world need additional education at this point on the dangers of breast cancer?¹³

After three days of public outcry, political petitioning and growing criticism, on February 3rd, Brinker released a statement that the Susan G. Komen Foundation had reversed its decision. She said that only those organizations under "criminal" investigation would be barred, thus making Planned Parenthood once again eligible to receive grant funding.

Four days after the reversal, Komen released a final statement that said:

"We have made mistakes in how we have handled recent decisions and take full accountability for what has resulted... Today I accepted the resignation of Karen Handel, who has served as Senior Vice President for Policy since April 2011. I have known Karen for many years, and we both share a common commitment to our organization's lifelong mission, which must always remain our sole focus."

In the three days before Komen's decision was reversed, Planned Parenthood received over 3 million dollars in donations from 70,000 donors, almost three times the amount they had received from Komen grants the previous year. Planned Parenthood's Facebook "likes" and Twitter followers increased

¹¹ http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/02/02/10303379-andrea-mitchell-interviews-susan-g-komens-nancy-brinker?lite

¹² <http://philanthropy.com/article/Experts-Say-Komen-s/130715/>

¹³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/08/us-usa-healthcare-komen-research-idUSTRE8171KW20120208>

by thousands. In contrast, Komen, an organization accustomed to accumulating accolades and messages of support, was drowning in criticism. Planned Parenthood President Cecile Richards said, "*I absolutely believe the exposure on Facebook and Twitter really drove a lot of coverage by mainstream media. I've never seen anything catch fire [like this.]*"¹⁴

Who is to blame?

According to Handel, the Board was trying to move away from vague goals such as awareness to more quantitative measures such as improving survival rates and lowering the number of deaths due to breast cancer. While twice-annual audits were required for grant recipients, Handel asserts that those audits weren't happening. Reports and site visits were the extent of oversight, a fact with which Handel took issue. Mollie Williams, whose team oversaw the grants, emphasized the importance of trusting grantee relationships.

John D. Raffaelli, a Komen Board member and Washington lobbyist, said the Board feared how the Stearns investigation of Planned Parenthood would damage Komen's credibility with donors. Raffaelli, the only Board member to speak publicly regarding the decision, said that Komen had previously lost support from anti-abortion groups. He said the pervasive feeling amongst the Board was simple: "*You should as a general rule always pick vendors and grantees that will broaden your base of support and not narrow it.*"¹⁵

According to a former Komen employee, earlier in 2011, an internal staff review and Board subcommittee recommended that Komen maintain its funding of Planned Parenthood. Mollie Williams, Komen's Managing Director of Community Health programs, threw her considerable weight and recommendation for the same course of action: funding for Planned Parenthood should continue and was consistent with the Komen mission. Reportedly, Handel objected to those recommendations. Despite the internal recommendations, the Komen Board voted unanimously on November 29, 2011 to approve the new grants criteria, thus cutting funding to Planned Parenthood. Mollie Williams, after being informed of the Board's decision, tendered her resignation.

¹⁴ <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/nationnow/2012/02/facebook-twitter-fueled-fury-against-in-susan-g-komen-for-the-cure-.html>

¹⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/us/uproar-as-komen-foundation-cuts-money-to-planned-parenthood.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

In the weeks after, the Board's decision was announced internally. Due to a somewhat strained relationship with affiliates, Komen's headquarters attempted to be transparent and informative. A post-decision conference call was held for affiliates regarding the new policy, which elicited a mixed response.

After Komen's reversal and her subsequent resignation in February 2012, Karen Handel granted an interview to Fox News, in which she said, "*I clearly acknowledge that I was involved in the process, but to suggest that I had the sole authority is just absurd.*" In her memoir *Planned Bullyhood*, Handel asserts that Komen had been looking for an exit strategy for the Planned Parenthood grants and she was tasked with examining the possibilities. In the end, the decision rested with Komen's president Liz Thompson and CEO Nancy Brinker with the Board's agreement.

Handel goes on to say,

*"Komen was an organization in transition, evolving from a start-up nonprofit to a thirty-year-old global force and working to strengthen its infrastructure and leadership. Turnover was a challenge, and because of turnover, there sometimes was a lack of continuity and consistency—in processes and practices and how they were applied."*¹⁶

Many expressed their support of Komen's reversal. On February 3, former employee Mollie Williams released a statement in response to Komen's reversal:

*"I am pleased that Susan G. Komen for the Cure apologized for its actions and seemingly reversed course. Planned Parenthood and Komen have complementary missions. They can accomplish much more together than divided. It was an honor to lead Komen's community health programs, and I wish them the best of luck as they move beyond this crisis."*¹⁷

Reversal and Continued Fallout

Social media wasn't the only medium through which Komen was hammered in the days following the announcement. Talking heads on television were harsh in their criticism. Opinion sections of the *NY Times* and *Washington Post* expressed outrage that Komen could have caved to political pressure. Of course, this "outrage" bore some similarities to political opinion as well. Ross Douthat, a conservative columnist for the *NY Times*, lamented that the coverage represented an "absolute" prejudice from the media on the issue of abortion, and that in those circles,

¹⁶ Karen Handel, *Planned Bullyhood*.

¹⁷ <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/02/ex-komen-official-mollie-williams-has-no-plans-to-return-to-group/252563/>

“Planned Parenthood is regarded as the equivalent of, well, the Komen foundation: an apolitical, high-minded and humanitarian institution whose work no rational person — and certainly no self-respecting woman — could possibly question or oppose.”¹⁸

Many women do oppose both Planned Parenthood and abortion. How many oppose abortion to the extent that they would have stopped supporting Komen for links to Planned Parenthood is unclear. Regardless, those voices were not heard as loudly in the weeks that followed Komen’s announcement and subsequent retraction. It did not help that the messages from Komen in the days after were confused at best, erratic and dysfunctional at worst. News trickled out slowly about dissent on the Board. Members of leadership resigned one after the other. The sky was generally falling on “Pink”.

Corporate sponsors stuck with Komen immediately following the storm. None of the sponsors dropped Komen following this controversy, though it remains to be seen if those contracts are renewed in the years to come. Locally, the effects were a bit more dramatic. Some local affiliates reported that numbers were down for their races. Others reported precisely the opposite phenomenon; numbers in Tulsa and Nashville were up following the controversy. Some of this appears to have been a belated endorsement of the original decision to cut funding.

From an organizational and leadership standpoint, the previous year has been nothing short of disastrous for Komen. Financials have not been released, but if race participants are any indication, donations will be down for 2012. This misstep also seems to have opened the door for competitors. For the first time in its history, Avon made an aggressive national ad-buy, running 6,000 commercials promoting its own awareness campaigns and walks during October, which is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Avon ran zero ads during that time span the years before. The American Cancer Society ran 1575 spots during that period, compared with 233 the year before.¹⁹ Catholic pressure seems unlikely to abate, and the Atlanta Diocese announced in October of 2012 that they would no longer partner with Komen.

Struggling to deal with continued criticism, in August of 2012 CEO Nancy Brinker announced that she would shift roles, moving to Chair of the Board for Komen. Liz Thompson, who’d been pegged by many on the Board as next in line to that CEO role, promptly resigned. Perhaps she viewed this announcement as critics so vocally did: merely a symbolic gesture that hardly shifted the reins of power.

¹⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/douthat-the-medias-blindness-on-abortion.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.thenonprofitimes.com/article/detail/cancer-walk-competitors-busy-in-wake-of-komen-debacle-4468>

Two board members left immediately, and a longtime board member and two-time board chair retired shortly afterwards. In the last five years, more than 30 high-level employees have come and gone, including three presidents, two chief financial officers, two general counsels, two chief marketing officers, and three public-policy executives.²⁰ It remains unclear just how deeply and broadly Komen's dysfunctional organizational structure will harm the fulfillment of its mission.

²⁰ <http://nymag.com/thecut/2012/08/brinkers-way-behind-her-pseudo-exit-from-komen.html>