Dr. Judith Salerno took over as Susan G. Komen president and chief executive in September 2013 — at a delicate time in the Dallas-based breast cancer organization’s three-decade history.

As the successor to Komen founder Nancy Brinker, Salerno came aboard in the aftermath of a nasty controversy related to the charity temporarily defunding
screening programs at Planned Parenthood clinics. Even though the funds were quickly restored, the episode damaged Komen and its ubiquitous pink-ribbon brand. 

Salerno, a Harvard-trained physician who previously served as executive director at the Institute of Medicine, a nonprofit Washington, D.C., research operation, believes the Komen organization is once again held in high regard by thousands touched by breast cancer.

What are your biggest accomplishments since being named Komen president?

I’d say it’s a renewed focus on, and investment in, the most serious issues that remain in breast cancer. We’ve made a lot of progress but this disease is still killing 40,000 women a year in the U.S. alone and half a million people each year around the world. So we’re redoubling our efforts into some key areas. One of those is metastatic disease, that is, cancer that has spread to other parts of the body. Metastatic disease is responsible for the bulk of breast cancer deaths, so this year we’ve added $17 million to our [previous] $130 million investment in metastatic research. Metastatic research also accounts for about one-third of the new research grants we’re making in 2015.

Another key area involves higher breast cancer death rates among women of color. African-American women, for example, are less likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer but 44 percent more likely to die of it. That’s appalling, and it’s a statistic that absolutely has to change. So in addition to our $90 million investment in disparities research, we’re working with health, government and nonprofit leaders in 10 cities with the highest rates of disparities to develop programs to ensure health equity, that is, access to quality cancer care for everyone.

A third priority involves the need to ensure continuity in breast cancer research, that is, to stop the exodus of young breast cancer researchers to other fields. We pledged last year to invest at least half of our research dollars in these early-career researchers and we’ve done so, because we need innovation, fresh thinking and continuity in cancer research.

Related to the Planned Parenthood controversy, it was reported to have caused a 22 percent drop in contributions in the following year. How damaging was that chapter to Komen's fundraising goals, and has the organization fully recovered?

Almost four years later, we’re on solid footing and moving forward. There’s no question that our donations suffered after 2012, and it didn’t help that the economy was still soft. I wasn’t at Komen in 2012 — I didn’t join until late 2013 — so I can
tell you that during 2012, when I was an “outsider,” I never questioned Komen’s value as the one organization doing the most for people with breast cancer.

People understand that organizations sometimes go through difficult periods. What’s important is what those organizations do about it. Since I arrived, we’ve been laser-focused on our mission work — helping people with breast cancer and funding the research that will save lives. And in the past year, we’ve built on that mission with new initiatives for health equity, metastatic disease, funding for young researchers, and leveraging technology like “Big Data” for the benefit of breast cancer patients and research. We are single-minded about our mission to end breast cancer forever.

Is the perception that Komen, however briefly, appeared to jump into the abortion debate something that you continue to battle in terms your worldwide image?

Let me be clear: Komen never has funded abortion or reproductive services, and never will. Our funding to community health organizations (over 1,200 organizations across the nation) is for breast health services only. Our grantees must provide Komen with detailed reports, twice-yearly, to ensure that our money is being used only for the breast health or breast cancer services for which they were intended.

Breast cancer is not a political issue. Our public policy and advocacy work is strictly limited to issues around access, affordability and quality of breast cancer care, cancer research funding and access to programs that protect low-income or uninsured women facing breast cancer. We don’t endorse candidates. We don’t contribute to candidates or parties. Period.

Regarding fundraising, the Pink Ribbon campaign is maybe one of the most successful campaigns ever, but it has more than its share of detractors who say Komen has teamed up with companies that pollute known carcinogens into our environment. For example, you’ve teamed with the oilfield services company Baker Hughes to distribute pink drill bits. What is your reaction to that criticism?

Well, let’s correct the record on the drill bits. Baker Hughes in Houston had supported our Houston affiliate for many years by forming local Race teams and volunteering – as many companies do in their local communities. The employees of this company are passionate about the breast cancer cause and wanted to do more since many of them had been personally touched by breast cancer, including the head of the drill bits division who had lost his mother to breast cancer. Their employees came up with an
idea to paint some of their drill bits pink and send them to the field with breast cancer information. In no way were the pink drill bits tied to any donations to Komen. The company made a flat donation to support Komen’s activities.

We have processes in place involving a large cross-functional team that evaluates each request from potential partners and decides whether we will accept a partnership. Komen was one of the original co-signers of the New York attorney general’s standards for transparency in cause marketing programs, and we’ve long had information on our website about factors that consumers should consider when deciding whether to participate in a cause marketing program. We consistently receive high marks for transparency by charity watchdog organizations and are proud that 80 cents of every dollar we spend goes directly to our mission.

**Does it bother you that critics want to hold Komen responsible for the activities of every company that wants to associate with the pink ribbon?**

It bothers me that we’re sometimes held accountable for pink fundraising activities which Komen would not support. All that is pink is not Komen, but we’re proud that pink has become the international symbol of the breast cancer movement.

I think it’s important for people to share what they think. Sometimes we’ll agree, sometimes we won’t. But we’re here for our community, and what our community thinks matters to us. We have 150 corporate partners. On occasion, people will question the value of one of those partners, and we’re open to hearing what they have to say. Without “pink,” we wouldn’t have made the advances which have led to incredible progress.

**You and actor-filmmaker Edward Norton have pioneered a partnership at the intersection of conservation and health with the Maasai people in the Mount Kilimanjaro region. What makes this particular effort unique?**

This has been a fascinating partnership because it shows very clearly how an investment in the health of a community can be a catalyst not just for health, but for other forms of economic development. Komen funded a health director for the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust, and the women who attended the health programs left those sessions feeling empowered to do more for themselves and for their community. They joined together to start a seed bank through the Conservation Trust and through a program called A New Course. The seed program provides them with additional income and helps to preserve the grasslands in the area. As Norton describes it,
they’re increasing their health, the health of their families, and the ecosystem, all starting with this investment in one health program.

**What has Komen learned from this partnership?**

It’s a model with tremendous potential for other partnerships. Women in almost every society are the heart of the family, and it’s well established that when you invest in women’s health, you’re laying the groundwork for stability and economic development. We’ve been involved in global outreach in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Europe and the Caribbean for years, and we’ve seen how these investments in health are the basis for positive change throughout society.

*This Q&A was conducted and condensed by Dallas Morning News editorial writer Sharon Grigsby. Reach her at sgrigsby@dallasnews.com. To reach Judith Salerno, email her through press@komen.org.*

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