

The Five Miler: A Run Through Redlands
By Annika Schaffroth

I have timed myself over and over. How long to the stoplight? How long to the orange grove? To the tumble-weeds? To the 25 mph corner? And each time it's about the same. I still check my watch. I check it when I come to the open field. I check it when I cross the street and when the busses pass too close. The numbers go straight through to the back of my memory to be stored until the next time I'm out here.

In Redlands, Calif., a residential town with short buildings seated below the San Bernardino Mountains, I spent four years letting my daily mood be determined by whether I went for a run, and whether I went for a run determined by if I could see the dark, desert-brown hills. Sometimes, the inland smog blanketed everything in the basin as it settled against the crescent mountains to the east. In the Inland Empire, Southern California, that smoky smog will sit all day. On the brighter side, the pollution makes for beautiful sunsets, like looking at chemicals through a spectrometer.

Sixteen minutes. A car slows behind me to make the turn as well, and then leaves me in its exhaust. I hold my breath instinctively. Not that this helps. I imagine my blood pressure rising from the pollutants I must take in along with the air I breathe.

On the days I could see the mountains, the morning light would play on the rolling foothills beyond the town. I would run out to the municipal airport, passing part of what is left of the navel orange groves that used to cover this valley. Now, suburban sprawl and modern, spackled houses interrupt these groves, but the nostalgic image of an orange still graces street signs throughout the town.

This is my favorite part of the run. If I remember to look up and trust my legs to avoid any rocks in the road, I see those hills and a plane taking off. The foothills bounce along with my stride. When my

foot hits the asphalt, I know exactly how it feels, and my body responds by pushing back. I wish I could run all the way to the mountains, but then again I like taking in the whole scene from afar.

On clear day, Redlands is a homey, quaint city. On days that can be described as opaque, it's hard to get motivated to do anything at all. According to Airnow.gov, a site that provides an Air Quality Index and air quality forecasts, the San Bernardino Valley, where Redlands lies, spends most of its days in the "moderate" rating. Another site, Areavibes.com, says Redlands' air quality index, which measures the median value of the most hazardous air pollutants, is 99.9% greater than the national average.

Twenty-eight minutes. Finally, I can take a rest. With a foot pushed against a street-light pole, I stretch my calf. I watch for cars. I give myself a minute and a half to stretch and walk, or however long it takes to get to the next palm tree. My back is to the mountains now. The asphalt meets the concrete part that slants down to the bottom of the curb. I try to avoid running with one foot in the gutter and the other on flat asphalt: it makes me feel crooked.

The air in Redlands is naturally heavy at only 1350 feet above sea level. But it seems heavier, weighed down by what has been added to it over the years. This area lies within the South Coast Air Basin (a rather fitting acronym: SCAB). For example, the City of Redlands website sites SCAB as having the worst ozone air quality in the nation and very high particulate matter levels: "The air quality in San Bernardino County results from a unique combination of factors; air flow patterns and emission sources, both local and those located through the region, result in some of the worst air quality in the nation. San Bernardino County regularly exceeds State and federal air quality standards for Ozone (O₃), and fine Particulate Matter (PM₁₀)."

For the next twelve minutes or so, I don't check my watch. Crossing with traffic and looking down at the uneven dirt road become priorities. Up ahead, two busses have to pass. Twice the exhaust waits for

me to run through it. In my head, I give it color (1970s green) and taste (chalk) and personality (shallow).

I spent four years inhaling that air. Some days, like the ones where I received e-mails advising me to say indoors, I may as well have been smoking a tail pipe. Redlands faces other environmental problems, like water shortages and suspected leaks from a Lockheed Propulsion rocket manufacturing site that contaminated a public water supply well. But it's the air that dictated so much during my time there.

I haven't looked up at the surroundings in the last fifteen minutes. I feel slightly claustrophobic on my three-foot wide, whitish-blue path. Strip malls, houses, warehouses, and telephone wires block expanses of ground and sky and the space between. I round a corner and I feel a change: a slight downhill which makes gravity feel more kind. It reminds me that I can't always see what must be present.

I would finish the five mile run between 45 and 50 minutes. That's almost an hour of heavily breathing in whatever covered the mountains and colored the sky orange and purple when the sun lowered itself between the spindly palm trees. Air quality regulations are in place, with goals and numbers set to make Redlands a better place to breathe, but it's hard to imagine that valley smog-free. The pollution, more so than orange trees, defines it now.