

I remember when my grandmother used to say, “ua cag, koj ua le Meskas lawm xwb?”. “Why are you just like an American now?”

I did not understand what she meant then, but now I feel the same way about my nieces and nephews and I feel compelled to remind them that I’m only one generation away from living in huts with dirt floors and that my parents didn’t have electricity or running water in their homes.

I tell them because it’s important to remember that it wasn’t long ago when things were not so easy for our family.

When my parents came to this country, they were the only Hmong family sponsored by a church in Newton Massachusetts. They didn’t know a single word of English, but they were determined to practice their independence by doing simple things like going to the grocery store where they were told they could buy food. While shopping, they noticed a lot of people buying this one product. It was a small item in a red and yellow wrapper with a photo of flames on it. They didn’t know what it was, but they imagined it to be delicious because everybody was buying it. And, they didn’t question it if it made them a little more American.

They were excited to get it and make their first American meal. When they got home, my mom pulled it out of the wrapper but she wasn’t sure if it was meat or a vegetable - they had never seen or tasted anything so hard and bitter. It was difficult to cut, but my mom was determined to cook it so she put the whole thing into boiling water. It wasn’t cooking. She decided to shave off small pieces and tried to fry it with vegetables, but it still didn’t seem to cook right. They finally went to our next door neighbor, whom had become a trusted family friend and asked for some advice on how to prepare this American food.

The friend laughed and threw it in the fireplace. She told them it was called Duraflame and that it was not food, but that people used it to start fires. My parents were embarrassed at the time, but today we laugh at how strangely confusing a simple trip to the grocery store was for them in those early years here.

My nephews and nieces will have their own struggles to overcome, but they’ll have these stories to empower them the same way I was when I realized how fortunate I am for the sacrifices and hardships my parents went through to get me into a house with electricity, running water and food that I knew I how to cook and eat. Such simple things that we often take for granted.