The truth is Pamela Wagar stopped counting after her 80th surgery and her 200th broken bone.

Wagar, 25, has osteogenesis imperfecta, often called “brittle bone disease.” Instead of growing straight and strong, her bones grow wavy and kinked like curly hair. When she was an adolescent, her bones could break if someone bumped into her.

Wagar, a first-year medical student, has returned to Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, where doctors saved her life 13 years ago after she fell from a chair onto a restaurant floor.

“Always had a love for anatomy, how the human body works. My mom would get me books on it,” said Wagar, who’s from Robesonia, Berks County.

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This is the third installment in an occasional series that looks at first-year students at Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center. All of the students face pressure in the daunting academic challenge of gross anatomy class. In addition to the intellectual rigor, Pamela Wagar of Robesonia must deal with unique issues because she’s just 3½ feet tall and must guard against breaking her fragile bones. Patriot-News staff writer Diana Fishlock follows the students as they transform from students into future doctors.
Pamela Wagar is greeted by her neighbor, Tammy Showalter, from Robesonia. Showalter was at Hershey Medical Center for the White Coat Ceremony, because she said she was proud of Wagar. "I love Pam," Showalter said. "She's like my daughter that I never had."

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"I really wanted to be able to help people in the way I was helped," she said. She spent countless hours at Shriners Hospital for Children in Philadelphia and in emergency rooms closer to home. "I feel like I can relate to the patients, and really, truly understand," she said. "I'll definitely be compassionate and an advocate for the patient's best interest. ... Sometimes they know best. They know their body better than anybody. I know that personally."

Sometimes fractures in her brittle bones wouldn't show up on X-rays, and her mother, Robin, would have to fight to get doctors to stabilize Wagar's broken bones with a cast or a sling. Wagar has inherited her mother's determination, she said. "I like the challenges of medical school. There are some extra challenges for me," said Wagar, who is 5'6 feet tall.

"The school has really helped me deal with those challenges," she said. When the students dissect cadavers in gross anatomy class, Wagar's group has an exam table that lowers to a height she can see from her wheelchair. For lab exams, "I actually get on a lab chair that elevates, then I wheel around to the tables. Then an assistant will roll the cadaver," Wagar said.

"For certain dissections, she must kneel on the table beside the cadaver, she said. "It's weird but necessary. When you don't think of it as an optional thing, you just do it."

Wagar has amazing perseverance and endurance, her mother said. "When she sets her mind to something, that's it. She puts everything in it. She always has. When she was in high school musicals, I didn't think she would have a back-seat role, and she didn't. She had one of the lead parts."

Like most of the first-year medical students, Wagar hasn't decided what type of medicine she hopes to practice. "I think it will be a challenge at times, but I can maneuver around it," she said. "I just modify where I am to their level."

Wagar researched a lot before applying to medical school. "I have friends who are in wheelchairs who are in medical school, so I made sure before anything that it was feasible," she said. "They kind of alleviated a lot of my concerns. They told me, today everything moves up and down."

"Wagar wanted to be a doctor for such a long time," said her fiancé, John La Macchia of Long Island. "She was up till 4 in the morning studying for this. I knew she had the drive to do it."

Wagar is Hershey's first medical student in a wheelchair, said Ian Zagon, the school's director of anatomy. "We didn't know what to expect," he said. "Pam is a pioneer. She's extraordinary."

She's smart, self-sufficient and popular, Zagon said. "When she meets people, they are drawn to her. She's one of those people who are very genuine in everything she says and does," La Macchia said. "When she speaks to you, you're the most important person in the world."

That's one of the qualities that will make Wagar a great doctor, said her study partner, Sheryl Purrier, 22, of Jamaica. "While I may freak out about certain things, she helps me stay calm and focus on what I need to do," Purrier said.

Zagon's been impressed at how she's adapted to medical school. "How is she going to do blood pressure, patient exams? I don't know, but she'll do it."