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Drowning case: unfinished justice

Christopher Nabors' friends rallied round on his arrival in the early hours of the morning at Charity Hospital, where he was doing his residency.

Nabors was probably still wet after swimming ashore and leaving Michele Haensel to drown, strapped into the small car he had driven into Bayou St. John.

Since Nabors was dead drunk, he faced mandatory jail time if convicted of homicide. The EMS technicians were instructed to leave the room, which they said had never happened before, while innocent fluids were pumped into Nabors' veins.

Blood tests then showed an alcohol level consistent with drinking a glass of wine at dinner, whereas Nabors had been guzzling beer and shots for hours.

In the course of that debauch, he had gotten into a row with a barman and told him to watch out if he ever wound up being treated at Charity. Apparently the Hippocratic oath isn't hip in some circles these days.

Nabors was able to hire hot-shot defense attorney John Reed, who pleaded him innocent and attacked the state's case as "innuendo and guesswork," but the

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jury was not fooled. Now we know why fraudulent evidence is described as "doctored."

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Perhaps, though, Haensel can never be fully avenged. Although Judge Dennis Waldron imposed the maximum sentence, 15 years was it. With good time, Nabors could be out in 2003.

Let us not blame the Legislature for coddling criminals, however. When that maximum sentence was enacted, nobody could have anticipated such a case as this. If Nabors had wanted to ensure that he got a long stretch, and earned universal contempt into the bargain, he could not have done a better job.

Not only did he make no attempt to save Haensel — climbing through the sunroof without

even trying to unfasten her seatbelt — he was in no hurry to tell anyone she was in the water.

He had no time to worry about her, because he had his career, his nifty sports car and his insurance premiums to fret about. At Charity he announced, "I don't even know the bitch's name." He later bought a pickup truck with the word "Splash" emblazoned on the side and rear.

When Haensel's parents spotted Nabors driving around town, they naturally concluded that he was making a joke about her death and wrote outraged letters to Waldron.

When Nabors was hauled up for sentencing, he testified that it hadn't occurred to him that the truck decals might add to his already considerable reputation as a heartless jerk.

Two of his colleagues also told an incredulous Waldron that the implications hadn't occurred to them either. If medical schools

are graduating people who are this insensitive, or this stupid, the rest of us had better hope we don't get sick.

Nabors turned out to have feelings after all, for his own plight reduced him to tears on the witness stand. At last, he admitted that he was drunk the night Haensel was killed and, indeed, that he was no stranger to alcohol-induced blackouts.

A couple of Nabors' colleagues testified that, sure, he was an arrogant s.o.b., but then so were they, because that's the way you have to be to cope with the demands of attending to the sufferings of humanity.

Plenty of doctors will be inclined to regard that as a slander on their profession, and the testimony evidently didn't do Nabors any good.

Neither, in the end, did the friends who hooked him up to the IV at Charity in an attempt to save his skin while police were still struggling to haul Haensel's body from the bayou. Prosecutors said they are looking into the case and reviewing the evidence.

While Nabors is now safely locked up, more justice remains to be done.

James Gill is a staff writer.