

maximum sentence to medical student

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Driver gets 15 years for death in bayou

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A Louisiana State University medical student who killed a woman when he drove his car into Bayou St. John after a night of heavy drinking was sentenced Thursday to 15 years in prison.

Christopher Nabors, wearing handcuffs and an orange prison jumpsuit, bowed his head as he listened to a judge describe him as a heartless villain who let his date drown last year.

District Judge Dennis Waldron, ignoring Nabors' last-minute display of remorse, gave the budding physician the maximum sentence for vehicular homicide. Nabors' earliest possible release date under "good time" provisions will come in 2003.

Nabors, 31, was convicted in November of vehicular homicide in the death of Michele Haensel, 25, of Metairie. Nabors now admits he was staggering drunk when he drove his car into Bayou St. John on the eastern edge of City Park on Feb. 17, 1995.

The car sank, and Nabors clambered out through the sun roof. But he apparently made no effort to help Haensel escape, and the woman died while strapped into the passenger seat of his Eagle Talon sports car.

Waldron said he is haunted by the image of Haensel pinned in the car. But he expressed even more anger at Nabors' appalling comments and attitude in the tragedy's aftermath.

Nabors, in oral surgery training at LSU Medical School, worried about his career, his car insurance and his vehicle — but not Haensel, trial testimony showed.

When he arrived at Charity Hospital that night, witnesses testified Nabors said: "I didn't know the bitch's name. I just picked her up in a bar."

"Your lack of respect for the victim by calling her 'the bitch' is something that will remain with me forever," Waldron said. "She deserves better than that on her tombstone."

Another factor leading to the harsh sentence was Nabors' purchase, after the accident, of a pickup truck with "Splash" decals on the rear and side doors. Haensel's parents were aghast when they spotted Nabors driving that truck, a point they stressed in letters to Waldron. The judge was incredulous after Nabors and two doctor friends testified they never considered the implications of "Splash" on the truck.

"I guess my sensibilities are a little more delicate than yours," Waldron said.

Before sentencing, in testimony punctured by frequent tears, Nabors said he prays for the Haensel family and is

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CHRISTOPHER NABORS

wracked with guilt because of what he did.

Describing himself as a raging alcoholic, Nabors admitted he guzzled beer and hard liquor shots for hours before getting in his car with Haensel. Looking at Haensel's mother, Cookie, Nabors begged for forgiveness.

"I was an idiot. It's my fault. I am completely responsible," Nabors said. "I can't say I like myself very much, but I'm not evil and I never meant to hurt anybody."

When Waldron announced the maximum sentence, Nabors' parents and family hurried from the courtroom. "God!" his father shouted, pounding on the heavy wooden door as he left.

His parents declined to comment on the matter, but Nabors' brother, Eric, said the family believes Nabors is sincere with his expression of remorse.

"We feel like nothing that was said today was taken into consideration," Eric Nabors said.

But the Haensels were quick to dismiss Nabors' testimony as mere performance.

"He's a careless human being who only showed remorse after he was found guilty to try and save himself," Cookie Haensel said. "But God has answered our prayers, and we hope this sentence makes a statement in the city."