

# Woman drowns, driver survives

By JAMES VARNEY

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A Metairie woman drowned early Friday morning after the car she was riding in plunged into the chilly waters of Bayou St. John and sank, police said.

As a howling thunderstorm raged overhead, police divers worked in 50- to 55-degree water trying to find the car, which was finally pulled to the surface about 5:30 a.m., police said.

Rescuers found Michele Haensel, 25, strapped in the passenger seat of the Eagle Talon. She was pronounced dead on the scene. Haensel's body showed no signs of trauma, and the cause of her death was drowning, the coroner's office said.

The driver of the car, Christopher Nabors, 30, of New Orleans, is a student at Louisiana State University Medical School and was being held for observation at Charity Hospital, police said. Police were awaiting the results of alcohol tests Friday afternoon, but said Nabors would be booked with vehicular homicide when he is released from the hospital.

The accident occurred about 2

a.m. as Nabors drove through the intersection of Wisner Boulevard and Friederichs Street on the eastern edge of City Park. Investigators have not determined how fast he was driving, but said the car became airborne after hitting the curb, clipped a tree and plunged into Bayou St. John.

Nabors apparently scrambled out of the sun roof as the car sank rapidly in about 8 feet of water. A police tactical unit, racing to the scene from their nearby headquarters on Moss Street, arrived minutes after the crash and found Nabors swimming toward the bayou's bank, but the car had already slipped below the surface, police said.

Unable to see the car, and ill-equipped to handle the cold water, the officers were able to help Nabors to shore but had to wait for divers to find the car, police said. Hours later, it was found about 100 feet from shore.

A family member at Haensel's Metairie home declined to comment Friday afternoon. The relationship between Haensel and Nabors was unclear, although police said they apparently met Thursday night.