

Car plunges into river, 1 dead

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A 13-year-old Bishop girl died and four others were injured Monday night after the vehicle they were riding in plunged into the Owens River near Chalk Bluffs at Fish Slough Road.

The body of Christina Bone was found Tuesday morning, five miles downstream from the crash site, by members of the Inyo County Search and Rescue Team (SAR).

A California Highway Patrol fixed-wing aircraft aided in Tuesday's search. Initially, Bone and 24-year-old Harland Dewey of Bishop were unaccounted for after Monday night's crash. Dewey was located at his home in Bishop Tuesday.

A CHP spokesman said the driver, Raymond Bencoma III, was cited for felony driving while under the influence and felony evading arrest causing an accident or death. He will also be charged with manslaughter and arrested on \$5,000 in local warrants. He will be booked into the Inyo County Jail upon release from the hospital.

The spokesman said additional charges involving child endangerment and abandoning a victim at the site of a crash are being considered. The CHP investigation into the crash continues.

The episode began at 11:30 p.m. Monday when an Inyo County Sheriff's deputy stopped an eastbound 1995 Ford Escort on Chalk Bluffs Road. As the deputy got out of his vehicle to approach the car, Bencoma, 20, drove off. The deputy gave chase and radioed for back-up.

A short chase had the vehicles along the winding road at the edge of the bluffs when the deputy lost sight of the Escort. The deputy and his back-up began searching the area where the car was last seen. The deputies then saw the car, fully submerged, upside down in the Owens River, some 75 feet below the roadway.

The deputies immediately called for more help, and ambulance, search and rescue, CHP and the Bishop Volunteer Fire Department went out as deputies attempted to locate the people who had been in the Escort.

As emergency crews set up lighting and rappelling gear, 18-year-old Allison Spratt of Big Pine was found by members of the media standing in the roadway leading into the crash site. Spratt, who was soaking wet and shivering from the cold, was placed into a pickup truck, wrapped with blankets and clothing, and driven to a location just east of the crash site. There, deputies questioned her as to how many people were in the car when it crashed, while ambulance personnel examined her for injuries.

Before being taken to the Northern Inyo Hospital, Spratt told law enforcement officers there were four other people in the car. A search of the area



Above, the 1995 Escort was slowly winched up the side of Chalk Bluffs early Tuesday morning after it plunged 75 feet into the Owens River. Below, SAR diver Arnie Peterson works to secure a cable to the axle of the submerged car. Photos by Jeremy Browne

began immediately.

When a ground search of the area turned up nothing, rescue personnel began to fear the worst. SAR team members geared up in wet suits in an attempt to determine if anyone was trapped inside the overturned car.

Because of the steep terrain, there was some difficulty in securing safety precautions for the SAR divers. At the request of rescuers, the Department of Water and Power reduced the river's water rate from 425 csf to 125 csf at the Owens Gorge.

SAR member Arnie Peterson jumped into the water, swam to the car and secured a line to the axle of the car. About an hour and a half after the crash, rescue workers were able to winch the car up from the river bed. Rescuers scurried to the car and learned there was no one inside.

By this time, investigators had learned the identities of the four other occupants of the car. Bencoma, who suffered moderate injuries in the crash, had managed to make it to his home. He was then taken to the Northern Inyo Hospital for treatment.

Law officers were dispatched to the residences of Dewey, Bone and



13-year-old Elsie Turner of Bishop.

All were accounted for except Dewey and Bone. Law officers contacted the pair's relatives and friends, who also began searching for them. SAR team members stayed on the crash scene throughout the night, searching the area in hopes of locating the pair. At daybreak, personnel from CHP, the sheriff's department and DWP began searching the area again.

At about 8 a.m. Tuesday, a relative

of Dewey's contacted law enforcement and said he had spoken with Dewey. CHP went to Dewey's residence and interviewed him. A couple hours later, Bone's body was recovered from the river and turned over to the Inyo County Coroner's Office.

Spratt and Turner suffered minor injuries in the crash. Dewey refused medical treatment.

Funeral services for Bone are pending.