



BREAKING: Police confirm body found in river near Grafton; witnesses recall seeing car enter river on Christmas Eve

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GRAFTON - Officers from the **Grafton Police Department** and **Jersey County Sheriff's Office** recovered the body of a man who witnesses saw drive his car into the river on Christmas Eve near the Lighthouse.

Interim Grafton Police Chief Peggy O'Neil said the departments recovered the maroon Mercury Grand Marquis from the river with the assistance of conservation

officers from the **Illinois Department of Natural Resources, MABAS Illinois, the Jacksonville-Morgan County Dive Team and Team Water Sonar Search and Recovery.**

According to a release, the car was located approximately 30 yards away from the riverbank near where witnesses saw it sink Saturday night. Bower's Towing pulled the car from the river and the **Jersey County Coroner's Office** recovered the body at 12:12 p.m. Tuesday.

The body has been identified by police, but that name is not being released at this time until an absolute identification can be made and the family may be contacted.

"The Grafton Police Department wants to thank the many agencies and volunteers who provided assistance, advice and manpower," O'Neil stated in the release. "Without these extraordinary people, it would not have been possible to locate and recover the victim so quickly. We extend a special thanks to **Bob Fitzsimmons** of the Jacksonville-Morgan County Dive Team and **Dennis Waters** of Team Water Sonar Search and Recovery who were instrumental in this operation.

"We are grateful to all who helped in any way and thankful this tragic search and recovery operation was successful," she continued. "We extend our heartfelt sympathy to the family and friends of the victim during this Christmas season. Our thoughts and prayers are with them in their time of loss."

Police said the incident is not being investigated as suspicious, but witnesses on the scene Saturday night believe the individual may have taken his own life.



The incident was witnessed by the **Eberlin family**, who live up the hill from the ramp where the incident occurred. **Rick Eberlin** said he, his wife, **Kim**, and the rest of their family saw a car parked near the river. Rick Eberlin said the car seemed suspicious, so he continued to keep an eye on it while the family ate dinner on Christmas Eve. Within five minutes of initially spotting the car, Rick Eberlin said he saw the car's headlights shining toward the river followed by a splash.

"It struck me as a little odd at first," he said. "I saw a splash and my daughter's boyfriend asked me what was wrong. I said a car was in the river. We could see the taillights twisting in the current."

Kim Eberlin said she called for the family to contact emergency services, gather blankets and go to the river. Rick Eberlin said members of his family piled into the truck and rushed toward the river to save the man from the icy depths. Kim Eberlin said she heard screaming, and assumed it was the vehicle's occupant, but instead realized they were coming from her daughters who were yelling at the occupant to get out of the vehicle as Rick Eberlin attempted to rescue him.

"He was in the water up to his waist," Kim Eberlin said.

Despite the attempts to rescue the person, Rick Eberlin said the person refused to leave the car. He said his son's friend looked the person in the eyes as the car continued to sink below the water.

"He made no effort to leave the car," Rick Eberlin said. "We could clearly see someone inside, but I was more focused at that point as to where I was in the water in relation to all the ice."

The car continued to sink, and Rick Eberlin said he had a moment of hope when the trunk lid of the vehicle opened. He believed the occupant was struggling to make a final attempt to escape, having a change of heart. Unfortunately, Rick Eberlin said only the vehicle's spare tire escaped from the waters.

"It happened so fast, but it seemed like hours," Kim Eberlin said. "It was so eerie. If we had finished dinner 10 minutes earlier, no one would have known about it or seen him. Regardless of why he did it, at least at the end he knew seven complete strangers thought his life was worth saving."

Christmas Eve at the Eberlins was somber following the incident. Kim Eberlin said the family returned home to keep warm and talk about what had happened. She had tears in her eyes Tuesday when she and Rick Eberlin recounted the story while watching police retrieve the maroon Mercury Grand Marquis from the Illinois River.