

SURVIVOR

FROM A1

we could."

Benoit, a stay-at-home mom who lives in the town of Richmond, was heading home about 5:30 p.m. Sept. 22 when her car started malfunctioning. She pulled over on County Road A and reached for a cellphone, but the vehicle lurched forward and climbed up a guardrail on a bridge overlooking the Wolf River.

Before she could react, the car flipped over and landed upside down in the river. As the vehicle sank into the cool, muddy water, Benoit fought to unhook her seat belt and open a door.

"The water came in real quick," she said. "I did everything I could to try and get myself out."

In moments of panic and chaos, Benoit tried gulping as much water as possible, thinking it would somehow slow the inevitable. In less than a minute, the vehicle was immersed and Benoit realized she was helpless.

Just one week after being baptized at a church near Green Bay, she grew calm and peaceful, surrendering herself to whatever came next.

"I felt like God was there with me. I stopped fighting," she said. "This is it. There's nothing I can do."

The last thing she remembers is an airbag inside the car deploying with a burst. She believes it knocked her unconscious.

By all accounts, she was without a pulse for about 10 minutes.

As the three bystand-

HOW TO HELP

A fund to help Krystal Benoit and her family pay medical bills and other expenses has been created at www.gofundme.com/uk73bm3s.

ers gathered on the scene, they struggled to get a door open on the submerged Ford Escape. Then, unable to see anything through the muddy water, Hoppe swam down and felt around until he could unlatch the seat belt and pull the driver out. He and Grover carried the woman's lifeless body to shore, where Effenberger joined them in performing CPR until she started breathing again.

Capt. Tom Tuma of the Shawano County Sheriff's Department said the quick actions of the three rescuers made it possible for Benoit's ordeal to have a happy ending.

"They did a fantastic job," Tuma said. "They, in my eyes, saved her life."

Benoit's partner, Rhonda Kramer, was at home with their kids — an 8-year-old boy and 5-year-old girl — but she did not know about the accident for more than three hours. Officials were initially unsure of Benoit's identity and address because the family had just moved from Green Bay one month earlier.

Kramer, 34, stayed by Benoit's bedside in the hospital until Benoit emerged from a coma eight days later and was strong enough to go home a few days after that. Other than some memory loss and muscle weakness, Benoit seems to have no lasting ill effects from the near-drowning.

"It's a miracle," Kramer said. "If anything, there should be brain damage. But there's nothing."

Although the family faces medical bills and other obstacles on their road to a full recovery, Benoit is grateful to have a second chance at life. She plans to make the most of it by spending more time with her children and not getting angry toward other people.

On her way home from the hospital, she knocked on Hoppe's door and thanked him for his part in the rescue. She hopes to meet with Grover and Effenberger someday, too.

Effenberger said he spotted Benoit not long ago in a store with Kramer and their children. He did not approach them or say anything, because he wanted to give them their privacy.

Besides, he said, seeing Benoit smiling and happy with her family told him all he needed to know.