

LAWRENCE - Juan C. Guzman had spent hours boating on the Merrimack River with family and friends Sunday and was preparing to go ashore when he took off his life vest. The two-time Iraq war veteran and father of four children never made it back to land.

Guzman has just removed his life jacket, at about 7:20 p.m., when a small watercraft rammed the 22-foot boat he was in, knocking him unconscious and throwing him into the water, his friends and relatives aboard said. Guzman's body sank and never resurfaced. Authorities presume the 29-year-old from Methuen drowned in water some 30 feet deep.

The accident has sparked a criminal investigation, and authorities are searching for three people who occupied the smaller craft, described as a motorized water scooter. The occupants of the small boat swam away immediately after the crash, witnesses told police.

Yesterday, as many as five boats from the State Police, Lawrence dive teams, and other area police departments combed a large swath of the river, working from the area where Guzman fell in, about 150 yards north of the boat launch near Phillip Riley Park, and expanding out as the afternoon wore on. As the sun began to set, they were still at it, while Guzman's wife sat on a rock next to the river, her sullen gaze fixed on the constant downstream ripples.

Dozens of Guzman's friends also stood along a black chain-link fence, watching as divers donned wet suits, and boats slowly motored across the murky waters. Martin Nunes, 29, was standing with close friends along the fence. He identified himself as the brother of Guzman's wife, Alcione Souza.

"This is all a shock, I can't believe what happened," said Nunes. He said he was not in the boat at the time of the crash, but boarded later in the evening to help search for Guzman.

"We looked and looked until the police told us we had to stop," he said.

Nunes said he helped carry his sister home Sunday night.

"She is devastated," he said.

Guzman and Souza have four young children, one girl and three boys.

“Juan loved his kids, he spent so much time with them. He had two motorcycles, but he sold those not too long ago because he got in an accident. He loved those motorcycles, but thought that with being a father, they were not safe. He wanted to be there for his kids,” Nunes said.

Lawrence Police Chief John Romero said those aboard the boat Guzman rode in had yelled at the driver of the smaller craft before the accident, shouting at them to stop circling them and jumping off the boat’s wake. By late afternoon yesterday, police were still trying to identify the three people who had been in the small craft.

“At this point, it’s a criminal investigation,” Romero said. The Essex district attorney’s office has assigned an investigator to the case, and the state’s Environmental Police are also investigating.

Both boats were taken to a nearby tow yard for analysis by investigators. Witnesses told police that the river was “total chaos” leading up to the accident, with numerous vessels buzzing around. “That’s not unusual,” Romero said. “There are people out there with no basic nautical skills.”

Nunes said Guzman emigrated from the Dominican Republic in 1995 and became a certified electrician after graduating from the Greater Lawrence Technical High School. Guzman served in the National Guard and was deployed to Iraq twice, in 2004 and 2006, Nunes said.

“He was just a great guy who fought for his country,” he said.■